

ALFRED HITCHCOCK MYSTERY

M A G A Z I N E

SEPTEMBER 1996

MILK OF HUMAN BLINDNESS

Me, I didn't have dreams any more.
Or compunction. Taking money
from a kid was no different from
taking it from anybody else.

by NANCY SPRINGER

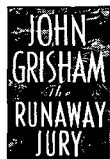
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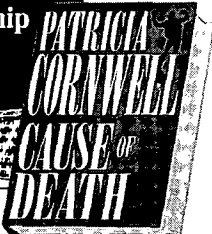
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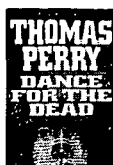
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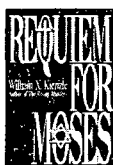
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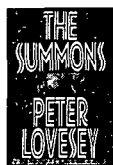
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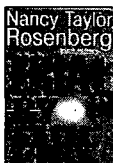
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

As we reported in the last issue, Nancy Springer, author of our delightful cover story "Milk of Human Blindness," has just won an Edgar award for Best Juvenile Mystery of 1995 for *Looking for Jamie Bridger* (Dial). We are very glad to welcome her to the pages of AHMM.

This, by the way, is her first published mystery short story, but Ms. Springer has written some forty previous stories, appearing in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Weird Tales*, several anthologies, and some children's publications. She is also the author of twenty-six novels including, in 1994 alone, two adult fantasies, *Larque on the Wing* (Avon) and *Metal Angel* (NAL)—and the Edgar winner for the Best Young Adult Nov-

el, *Toughing It* (Harcourt Brace).

"I was raised along the Passaic River in Livingston, New Jersey," she tells us, "back when that area was still country, and to this day I love wetlands, am haunted by a sense of a vanished Eden. My finest accomplishments are my sanity (considering that I was raised in the fifties), my marriage (twenty-six years), and my kids, almost grown now. . . . In my old age I aspire to be either a coot, a curmudgeon, or a codger." She presently lives in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

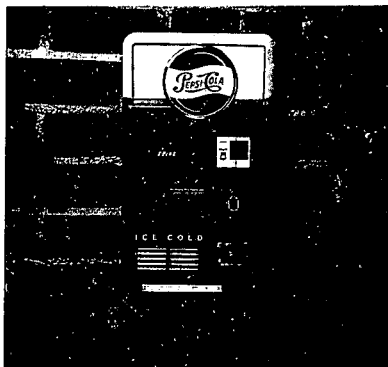
Dr. A. N. L. Munby (1913-1974), author of our eerie classic, "The Tregannet Book of Hours," was first in the antiquarian book trade and then spent many years as the librarian of Kings College, Cambridge.

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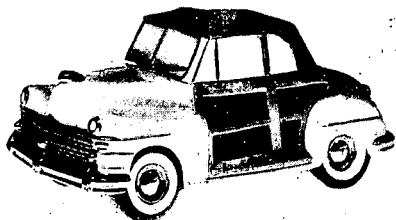
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FICTION

Milk of Human Blindness

Nancy Springer

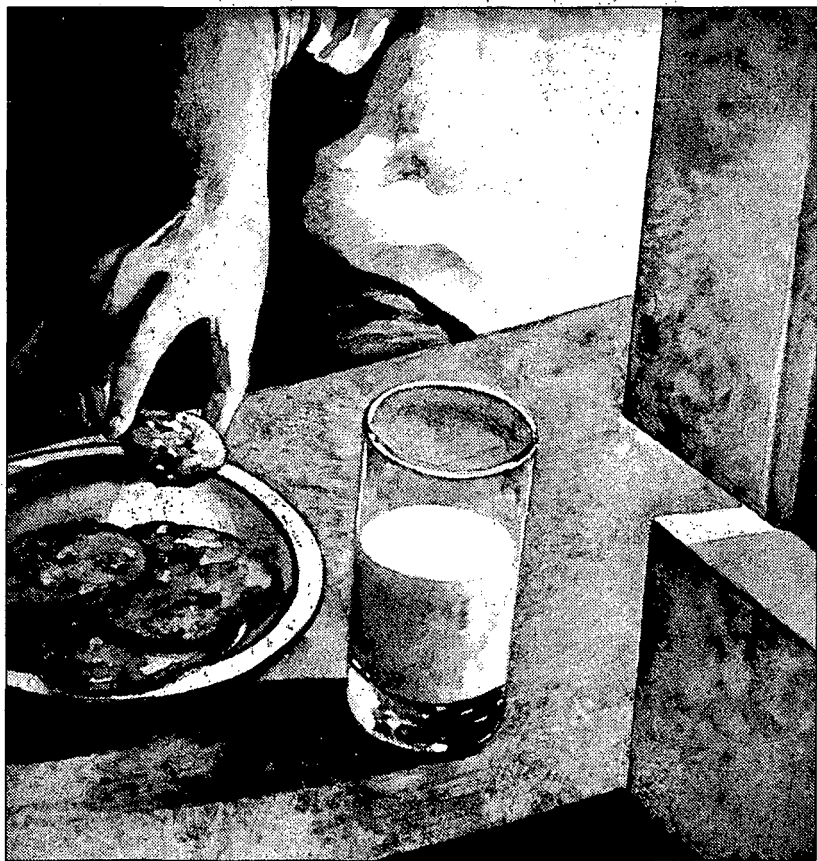


Illustration by Will Williams

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 9/96

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I could tell she was surprised I was black. White people aren't surprised to see a black cop any more, but they get surprised to see a black private cop for hire. Which is stupid, but I let it pass; it made us even. I was surprised she was just a kid. She was at that age, maybe eleven, twelve years old, where she was as tall as a woman, where the kind of slime that was common in this neighborhood might mistake her for a woman, but she still had a child's straight gaze. She had light brown hair yanked straight back from an Alice-in-Wonderland forehead, gray eyes, freckles. She had a strong straight body, narrow hips, flat chest just beginning to soften. She was at an age where she could grow up strong and beautiful or she could get ~~huffy~~.

Not that any of this mattered to me. I've got no milk-and-cookies ideas about kids, the things I see.

She said, "Are you Mr. Jefferson?"

"Yes."

"You're the private detective?"

"Who else would I be, the candyman?" Business wasn't great. Lancaster, Pennsylvania, has as much trouble as anyplace but those Deutchers hate to let go of money. I was doing mostly repo and process serving. I was cranky.

She didn't blink. Her stare was more than childlike; it was intense. It inkled that she was one of the strange ones, could have been a moron or an Einstein, maybe both. I was thinking this as she walked up to my desk and laid money on it. She said, "I want you to find my parents."

I looked at the money. It was two hundred dollar bills fastened together by a paper clip. I said, "Honey, that'll buy you exactly two hours of my time."

"It's all I've got."

"Where'd you get it?"

"Found it in the street."

I stared at her, wondering why I believed her.

She took the stare to mean the opposite. She said, "Six o'clock this morning. I was coming back from my paper route. I found it lying on the sidewalk right in front of my house."

Paper route. It was so apple pie it made me round-eyed. Sure, she was exactly the kind of kid who would get up before daylight to deliver papers. But was her mama crazy, letting her out on the streets at that hour?

Thinking about it made me grouchier, and sarcastic. "So you

~~~~~  
found two hundred dollars. Don't you think you'd better turn it in?"

But she didn't catch the sarcasm at all. She said, "I thought of that, but I figure it's drug money."

She probably figured right. "And you don't want to use it to buy a Shetland pony or something?"

"No. I want you to find my parents."

"You don't have parents?"

"Just adoptive parents. I want to find my real parents."

Sounded easy. Just gag my way into the records. Most of the things people ask a private cop to do are bonehead easy.

She said, "I was left on an Amish doorstep when I was about four months old."

Whoa.

She had bad photocopies of some overwrought newspaper coverage. I read enough to get the gist. Amish widow woman in isolated farmhouse, going to bed, sees a car with no lights on come down the dark lane and stop. Watches as a shadowy figure, can't even say whether it's a man or a woman, deposits something on the porch and drives away. Finds baby in cardboard box on porch. Takes half an hour to run to next farm. Amish guy at next farm takes half an hour to buggy on down to a public phone. Cops take half an hour to find the farm where the baby was left. Car long gone. Amish woman can't describe it. Baby taken to hospital. Perfectly healthy, happy, well cared for. Big toothless grin for the front page photo. Heck of a cute baby.

"Those are the only baby pictures I have of me," the girl said.

I looked at her. "What's your name?"

"Sarah. Sarah Hess."

"Sarah, what do you want to find these people for? They ditched you."

"It says they took good care of me." She pointed to a paragraph in a newspaper article as if it were holy writ. "They put me in a flannel nightgown with bunnies on it. They wrapped me in a blanket." Her finger caressed the photocopied words. "See?"

"Yeah, I see." What I wasn't saying was that it was not going to be possible to find her parents. The cops had tried. They'd checked out every female baby born within a hundred miles of the Amish farm in a two month period around the time Sarah might have been born. If they'd tried to check out every female baby born in the United States during that time, they'd probably still be checking.

Two hundred dollars. Two hours. The kid was wasting her mon-

ey. I knew that look on her freckled face; she had a dream. When she'd found the cash lying on the street, she figured it was the lottery in the sky handing her her big chance. She'd hire me, I'd find her parents, they would get her out of the nabe, take her home with them, give her a warm fuzzy nightgown with bunnies on it.

Me, I didn't have dreams any more. Or compunction. Taking money from a kid was no different from taking it from anybody else.

"Okay," I told her. "I'll see what I can do."

I went to see the Amish woman on the off chance that I could pull a Perry Mason and get her to break down and confess amid copious tears that she had had a wild affair with a gypsy who was passing through and the baby on the doorstep was hers. It didn't work. In just about any circumstances a black city dude talking with an Amish woman wouldn't work, but the main problem was that she was eighty-three years old. Past menopause when the baby appeared.

That shot the two hours. I served papers to a pimp on the way home, then scrawled a one paragraph report for Sarah—with Bic pen because I'd traded in my typewriter on a computer and wished I hadn't—then I sucked on a finger of Southern Comfort while I waited for the kid to show up.

She came running in like she meant it, head down, arms pumping. She slammed into the desk before she stopped, and when she looked up, her eyes were scared. "I need that two hundred dollars back."

I shoved the report toward her. "You already spent it."

"But I need it back! It wasn't drug money. It was Mrs. Fenstermacher's money."

"Mrs. who?"

"An old lady who lives on my street. It was her Social Security money. She needs it to pay the rent. She'll get evicted if I don't give it back."

"Son of a gun," I said. "And I didn't find you any parents, either."

"Mr. Jefferson, *please*." Her gray eyes were huge. "I've got to give it back. I'll work for you. I'll work it off."

Oh, *right*. Like I wanted a twelve-year-old working for me. "So you're in trouble, and now you expect me to—"

"I'm not in trouble. But Mrs. Fenstermacher—"

"Your mama and daddy don't care that you spent Mrs. Fensterwhatsit's money on me?"



"My mom's drunk. She don't care what I do. My daddy split years ago."

My turn to stare. "They adopted you out to a drunk?"

"She wasn't drunk then. She started after Daddy left. Please, Mr. Jefferson, can I have the money back? Please?"

It was like she hypnotized me. I pulled out my wallet and handed her the two hundred dollars. She grabbed it and sprinted out.

As soon as those gray eyes were off me I came to and started calling myself every kind of fool in the street thesaurus. I'd just wasted most of a day and given the money back. Last time I'd ever hire out to a kid. Damned little con artist.

I was so ticked I got up off my butt, threw my drink down the john, and started checking out Sarah's story.

Knock me silly. It was true.

Sarah lived a couple of blocks away from my office. Her mother was a drunk, living on Yukon Jack, food stamps, and Sarah's newspaper money. Her father was out of the picture. The kids I talked with didn't like Sarah but they kind of respected her. She went to school, didn't drink or do drugs, didn't want anything to do with the street. Wanted out. Wanted something better.

As for Mrs. Fenstermacher, yep, sure enough, she'd lost her Social Security money and Sarah had returned it to her.

What was this kid, a little ray of sunshine? The way her life was, what made her want to do good?

I was still wondering a couple of days later, and swearing at my computer and doubtful of the existence of goodness in the universe in general, when she walked into my office after school. "I came to start working off my debt," she said.

I was surprised she came back, never expected to see her again, and I hate surprises. "Oh, goody. Just what do you think you can do for me?"

"You got anybody you want tailed?"

I rolled my eyes. It's only like that on TV. Sarcastically I said, "You think you can get this computer to print out?"

She came over and figured out that I had the frammitz disconnected from the whangdoodle, I forget what already, but she got it printing within a couple of minutes. Then she sat down and fixed it so it would come up with the font and margins I like to use. The street kids had told me she was in seminar; I hadn't understood what that meant, but I did now. Jeez, Sarah was a regular preado-

lescent genius. Or at least she knew a truckload more about computers than I did. She whatchacallit, she formatted my disks. She installed my virus checker. She hooked up my modem for me.

She said, "Okay, you're ready to surf the Net."

I was sitting in the client chair staring at her. I said, "Sarah, do you think you could trace skips on that thing?"

"Do what?"

"Find missing people." And save me a lot of money on the skip-tracing service I was using.

Her gray eyes lighted up like silver platters. She said, "You mean, like, find my parents?"

Not a chance in the world. But I wanted to keep her coming back. I said, "Sure, yeah, we can try."

She came every day after school and Saturdays, too, if I was in the office. She already knew how to make the computer look up anything in any library anywhere, and she learned to do the same for the public records in courthouses, and then she started finding ways of getting into the not-so-public records, like the DMV and the Assistance Office and the credit bureaus. I helped her gag her way in. She started tracing repos for me.

In between jobs she worked on finding her parents. She was checking the news morgues throughout the state for stories that might clue her into something. It was her plan, not mine. It was just no use, and I sort of tried to tell her that. "One thing you know about your parents, they were smart," I said.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Real smart. Dumping you at an Amish farm, I mean, that's brilliant. No electricity; nobody's gonna flick on a porch light. No phone, nobody's gonna call the cops. No guns. And even if an Amish person saw the car, they wouldn't be likely to know what make or model it was. Brilliant."

"Yeah," she said, pleased that she had smart parents.

"Those brains of yours gotta come from somewhere," I said.

But she didn't have enough brains to quit trying to find them.

Meanwhile it was fun to find out she wasn't all white-bread Holsum. There was a touch of con artist in her after all. She gagged a phone company employee and traced a runaway wife from Pennsylvania to Oregon for me.

She said, "Are you married?"

"You don't see a ring on me, do you?"

"You don't need to wear a ring to be married."



"No, I'm not married."

"You got a girlfriend?"

"No, I don't have a girlfriend!" This was starting to get annoying.

"I know why not," Sarah said. "You're a grouch."

She made me laugh, dammit. "That's right. I'm a grouch."

"You gay?"

"No!"

"You just don't have anybody."

"That's right. That's the way I like it." No commitments, no obligations, no mush. No sentimental ideas. No flies on me.

That's what I kept telling myself the day I went to see Sarah's mother.

Late afternoon. Sarah was in my office accessing credit records to track down a deadbeat for me, and I'd taken to leaving her there, she could answer the phone, while I slid down to the corner bar for a drink. One of the street kids came up to me. "You the detective? You said you wanted to know stuff about Sarah Hess?"

"Sure."

"What'll you pay me?"

"Depends on what you have to tell me."

So he talked, and I never got my drink. Instead I was out fifty dollars, and there I was stepping over trash to get up a narrow stairway that smelled like cat pee and I didn't like it. I'm no damn do-gooder. I just didn't want to lose a good skip tracer, dammit.

Sarah's mama—adoptive mama—had buzzed me up, but it still took her a while. Finally she opened the door and I said hi but she didn't say a word, just stared at me with bleary gray eyes.

"Mrs. Hess, this is about Sarah."

She stood there without a flicker of reaction. She was wearing a T-shirt that had been puked on and as far as I could tell nothing else. Maybe underpants. She was thin the wrong way. Skin hung down from her arms. Faded blotchy skin hung in folds on her face.

I told her, "Don't let Sarah go out on that paper route any more. I heard some talk. Some of the home-grown slime has noticed her. They're thinking about doing a little wilding."

She looked back at me with no more expression than a dead fish.

"Mrs. Hess?"

She said in a blurred voice, "You let Sarah alone."

"It's not me." I had to spell it out darker. "It's punks on the street. They're talking about assault. Rape."



She didn't seem to understand. She wasn't even looking at me any more. "Mind your own business," she mumbled, turning away.

"Mrs. Hess—"

She closed the door on me.

God, this was Sarah's mom? It made me so mad I wanted to kick the door down and tell her what I thought of her useless drunken ass. But that wouldn't do Sarah any good. I stood in the stinking stairway breathing hard and trying to think.

You had to admire the job the adoption agencies did. Sure, they'd given Sarah to a drunk, but what a perfect physical match. Take away the effects of age and booze and you could see it. Gray eyes, brown hair, high forehead, fair freckled skin.

I went to do what I should have done in the first place, which was talk to Sarah.

But when I got back to the office she'd already left. There was a note for me. HAD TO GO FOR GROCERIES. SEE YOU TOMORROW. SARAH.

All right, okay, fine. I wasn't going near her reeking apartment or her drunken mother again. I'd done what I could.

She wasn't my daughter.

I had no obligation to her.

It was a dirty old world. Only a fool would get sentimental about a kid. And I was no fool.

Fine. Whatever. I was going to go home, forget about it, get a good night's sleep.

Right.

So I set my alarm clock for three o'miserable clock in the morning.

So naturally what happened was the only thing that could possibly have made life more annoying. The damn thing didn't go off.

You know how it is when something's heavy on your mind while you're asleep. Even though it was still dark, I woke up like the alarm had gone off in my head and looked at the clock.

Four A.M.

Crap! I bolted up, yanked on my shoes and a coat, and ran out the door. I tried to break a few land speed records, but the first thing I saw when I pulled up to Sarah's apartment was a couple of yellow plastic straps lying on the sidewalk, the kind they wrap the bundles of papers with. Sarah was already out on her paper route.

I drove in what I hoped was the right direction, looking for newspapers on doorsteps and swearing, damn it, hadn't even had my

damnable coffee, what sort of fool kid was out on the streets at this godforsaken hour—

I saw something white. Bobbing like a ghost.

Oh. Oh God no, she was cutting through the park.

The white thing was her canvas bag of newspapers. I'd no sooner spotted her than she disappeared into the shadows beneath the trees. I left the car in the middle of the street and ran after her.

But they were there ahead of me. Waiting.

The first glimpse I got was of a white flurry in the night, her shoulder bag swinging, newspapers flying everywhere. Then Sarah burst into sight, running. Sprinting. She knew how to run, she almost outran them and she sure as hell outran me as I puffed along fumbling for my pistol.

They caught up with her just as she reached the sidewalk at the edge of the park. They tackled her. She fought, but she couldn't fight off all four of them. They started dragging her back into the park. She screamed, but one of them had his hand over her mouth. Only a choked sound got out, like a baby whimpering.

I was running as fast as I could, but I was still too far away to do anything but yell. "Stop! Police!" I roared in my best cop voice.

They crouched and looked to see how many of me there were. Bet you know the answer. There was only one.

"Hands up! Now!" I finally had my pistol out with the right end pointed away from me. I fired a shot into the air.

Who was I trying to kid? I didn't want them to put their hands up; I wanted them to clear out. They wanted to off me. It could have gone either way.

"Hands up!" I took a stance and aimed the pistol, knowing I couldn't fire it. I'm not that good a shot. I might have hit Sarah.

They ran. Thank God they ran.

My hands shook as I put the gun away. I felt like I was going to have a heart attack. I could barely walk over to where Sarah was lying on the ground, crying.

"Sarah." I folded to sit on the grass beside her, and I didn't know what to do so I patted her back. I was puffing too hard to tell her shut up, she was okay.

She said, "Mr. Jefferson," and next thing I knew she was in my arms, crying on my shoulder.

"Sarah." Okay, I got my breath back, but I was so stupid choked up I could barely say anything sensible. "Sarah, no more paper route, you hear? I can't take this kind of stress."



"I—my mom—we need the money—"

"It's not worth it, Sarah."

"I—have to—"

"Forget it! You work for me. I'll pay you."

She sat up and looked at me like I was the angel Gabriel with a guitar. Those rainy gray eyes did me in. I started babbling. "Sarah, dammit, don't look at me that way, I'm slime, I've been cheating you. Listen, you worked off that two hundred dollars long ago, besides which I should never have taken it from you in the first place, I knew I couldn't find your parents. It's just not possible."

She winced and flushed and looked down. She mumbled, "They're not my parents."

"It doesn't matter." All by themselves my arms reached out and hugged her again. "You lied to me, well, fine, how many times have I lied to you?"

I'd figured it out when I saw her mom. And back in the office I'd done a little checking. No adoption papers were filed on this kid. She was the biological item.

Smart kid. Smart enough to face that she was stuck with a daddy who'd abandoned her and a mama who didn't care. Most kids in that fix would wish they were adopted, would wish they had other parents, would dream of finding real parents who would love them and take them someplace better. But this was Sarah. She had the brains and the guts to try to make it happen. She went looking, she found the news story about the baby left on the Amish doorstep. And she figured if she said she was that baby, and she tracked down those parents, she could make them take her in. Maybe they'd be sorry. Maybe they'd even love her. Why shouldn't they love her? They'd never know she wasn't theirs.

Kind of lamely I said, "Listen, Sarah, we can find your real daddy."

"No—good." She was crying again. "He's already—made it clear—he doesn't want—"

She couldn't finish the sentence. I held her and patted her and held her some more.

She whispered, "I just want somebody—to care about me."

I couldn't say a word. She cried till she calmed down. Then she sat up and blew her nose.

By then I'd remembered it was five o'clock in the morning and I still hadn't had my coffee. "Okay," I said in my crankiest voice, "I



just want to make it clear that I do not care about you. That's why I am not here. Do you understand?"

And yes, she was every bit as bright as I gave her credit for. She started to smile. Her eyes shone.

"Damn straight," I grumped. I got up and put a hand down to help her up. "C'mon. Forget your newspapers. You're not delivering papers any more, you hear?"

Knock me silly if she didn't grin.

"You just stick with me till you're grown," I told her.

So that's the way it stands. She calls me Daddy Jefferson these days. Sometimes she just calls me Daddy. Fine by me, but I try not to let it get in the way of business. I mean, I give her stuffed animals for her birthday and whatever, and I buy her notebooks and warm clothes, and I try to see that she eats right, and I listen to her when she tells me things. But that's all. No big deal.

All right, okay, one more thing, so I have milk and cookies waiting when she comes in after school, so what? I'm just trying to keep a good skip tracer happy. Nothing mushy. You won't catch me getting sentimental about a kid.

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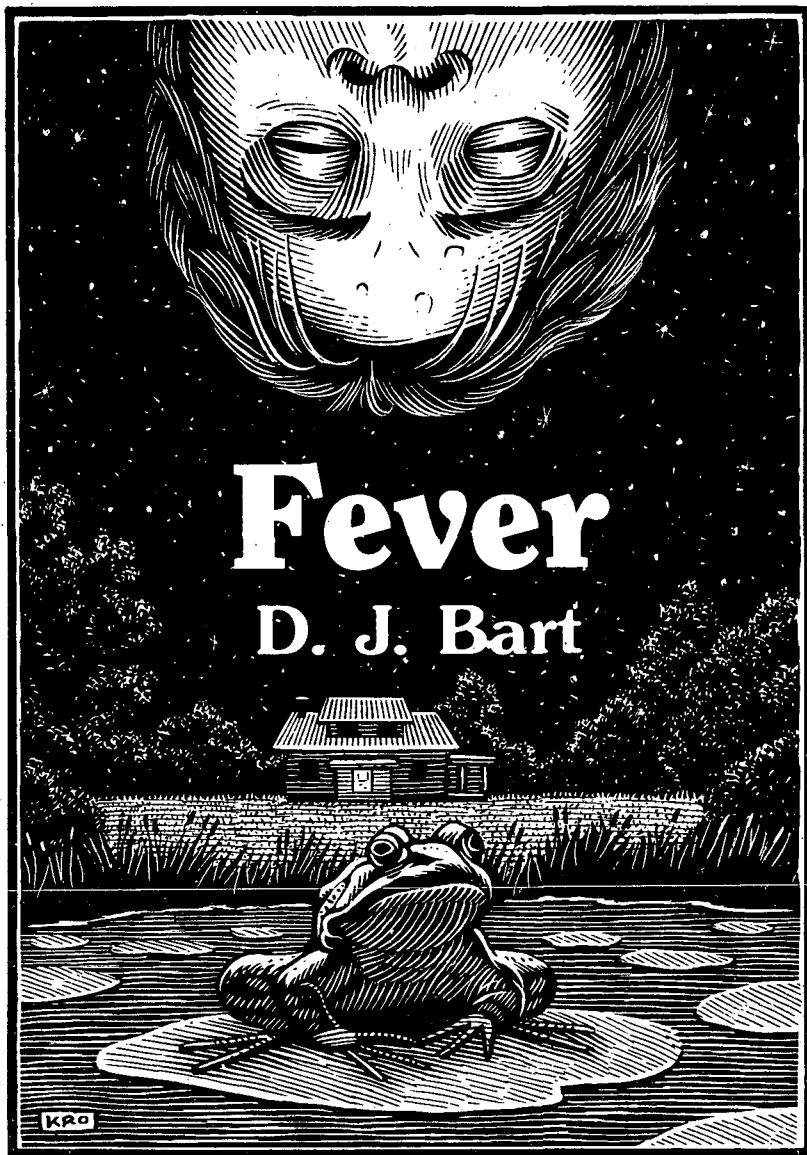


Illustration by Dan Krovatin

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 9/96

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Tilting forward just a fraction of an inch allows the transparent skin of the pond's surface to bisect your view, and if it were daytime you'd be able to see below and above the water at the same time. Somewhere you've learned that this is the nature of amphibians, creatures that live more than one way of life.

At night like this, though, there's nothing visible beneath the surface. But above, across the pond and past the stand of gently swaying bulrushes another thirty or forty feet, sits an old rental house, its shabby condition obscured by the night. A bright rectangle of light from the downstairs window is reflected in silver, glimmering on the surface of the water like a narrow slick of mercury.

The indistinct murmur of voices coming from the house suddenly escalates. "Drew owed me, now *you* owe me!" the deep, malevolent voice insists, followed by the sound of painful contact, brief needle prick of a scream.

You feel the frown on your brow deepen, your line of sight ascends, and there's the yellow glow of a nightlight, shyly radiating from the upstairs window at the south end of the dwelling.

It's your room—

—and now you're lying there, having just turned the pillow to the cool side, still not completely free of the sensation of being a frog, seeing the world through round, blinking eyes while mostly submerged in night-blackened water.

"I told you, Ray, I don't know where the money is—he never told me," the mother pleads as you gratefully seize the familiar voice from the warm, humid air of the tiny upstairs bedroom.

—and with a shuddering sigh turn onto your other side, once again surrounded by the strangely warm dampness of the pond.

To scramble up onto the slippery pad of a water lily near the bank does not seem difficult. It's like slithering out over thin ice: just distribute your weight and the fragile support will be enough. A simple matter of basic physics, that teacher back in Santa Fe would say . . . the one who praised your intelligence, but said you lacked focus.

Hovering above the pad, a twenty-four-hour bug might begin a tentative approach, eyeing the languid branch of a willow whose green leafy fingers lightly caress the still water, barely stirring the surface. Reflected light off the pond could illuminate the silently fluttering insect's sheer pale wings.

Something flicks out through the dark as though of its own accord and snatches the insect from the air—round eyes blink as though in surprise—and you try to swallow, uncertain as to how to feel . . .

there is much about this form of living you simply can't imagine.

"Don't give me that crap, Helena; Drew told you where the money's hidden, he told you everything!" Another slap, resounding across the water and up to the small bedroom.

The man has been at the house for a day and a half, the arguments becoming more frequent and intense, the stranger smelling of perspiration and anger. You're afraid something might happen to the mother. Or to yourself.

Through a mean laugh the man says, "Your life is pathetic, Helena. That's some kid you got up there, looks nine or ten, not fourteen, for Christ's sake."

"Shut up, murderer!" the mother shouts.

The man laughing, a screen door slamming. And then silence . . . long moments creep through the heavy darkness, eyelids beginning to droop as the hums and murmurs of the night seem to diminish around you. Your skin is damp, but you feel feverish and strangely indistinct, as though slowly disappearing.

—turning the pillow again to the cool side, sighing deeply and feeling your own warm breath buffet an already heated face. Pulling the sheet up over your mouth, then rolling it down under a quivering chin, twisting the cloth and abrading tender fingers.

"Life is pain," the grandmother often said, you sitting at her swollen feet, fascinated by the imminent separation of ashes from the smoldering cigarette held between pudgy fingers.

But now, with the dim glow of the nightlight mildly intrusive, you begin a fitful descent into the beckoning maw of sleep as from the pond you hear the chirping croak of a small green sentinel.

It's another day and the man is still there.

But joy is filling you, the wind is wild and tearing at your legs, the earth far below—forelock whipping wildly and stinging your eyes, bringing tears—a galloping cloud soaring high above the ground, gliding through the summer air like that winged horse in the father's old mythology book.

"Life is a myth, sonny, we never remember it the way it really was," the father told you when you were hiking together up north of Taos.

Not flying now—*running!*—running on the yellowed turf of Hanley's pasture, hooves pummeling the ground beneath your great, pendulous belly, evoking a continuous thunder from the dry earth and reverberating up through all your powerful legs. Running

alone, but pretending the father is there-with you, running, the two of you, free and happy.

The father told you, "Just let go, sonny, forget your fear and run full out down the slope. Let your body do the thinking—just enjoy!"

And it'd worked—not a cactus spine, not a stumble—serpentineing all the way down the long dry desert foothill near Taos, reaching the arroyo below: sweaty, dusty, and breathing hard, but you remember feeling lighter than you'd ever felt before. The father had grinned proudly, nodding.

And now, running over this pasture with that same abandon, your body doing the thinking, free to—

A high, painfully enduring scream coming across the fence from the rental house. The mother running down the yellow, sloping lawn toward the green-ringed pond, the loud man chasing her.

You turn slowly, impeded by a kind of viscous, unseen barrier. The screams wound your senses as you struggle to coordinate faltering hooves, wildly straining to tear free of the debilitating web of panic.

The mother, blouse torn and hanging, keeping the drooping branches of the willow between her and the angry man, feinting to the right, now to the left, lashing out with the hanging part of a branch, switching the man's face, enraging him.

The image of their struggle is distorted—heatwaves rise as though emanating from a fevered brain—but finally you're in motion, hooves again pounding the sunbaked ground, carrying you toward—

Your eyes fill. It's not true, you're not thundering toward the fence on sharp, deadly hooves—no, only two bare feet are beneath you, numbly striking the ground in the agonizingly slow cadence of a funeral dirge as, impossibly, the fence seems to recede.

Through blurred eyes you see that the man has her now.

Shame falls around you in scalding sheets, slowing your already clumsy attempts to scale the fence, using just hands and feet.

... Now finally running toward the pond with the impotent gait of a mere boy, your legs mostly healed but still stubby—mighty hooves gone, the wide-bladed teeth of a horse no longer yours to wield as weapons—

—but biting down hard anyway.

"Little son of a bitch!" the man screams, savagely knocking you to the damp bank with a glancing blow of his fist.

Stunned, you lie at the pond's edge, a hovering dragonfly just

above your line of sight . . . you hear the gentle lapping of tiny waves from some disturbance beneath the water.

Through a thin fog of wavering consciousness you see the double arc of teethmarks on the man's arm. Your tongue is salty and swollen, the coppery taste of your own blood oddly satisfying as mind and vision slowly come into focus.

—a trembling hand stroking . . . smooth, soft fingertips inscribing tiny invisible circles on your aching, hot forehead.

"You bastard," the mother hoarsely whispers. "Look what you've done, his mouth is bleeding—and he's burning up."

"The runt's as crazy as Drew was—crazy as you!"

And through tall weeds, from your place of hateful scrutiny, you see the man's feet turn away, the toe of a worn boot squishing a grasshopper, leaving its mangled corpse behind in the dry, dead grass.

The mother screaming, "That why you set the fire that killed him, you scum?"

This makes you sit up . . . you study the mother's face as she glares after the man. This loud man killed the father? Burned him?

And your thoughts are at some lakeside cabin—insects flying into an electronic device, sizzling and falling to the ground. You'd asked the grandmother how a frying bug feels, your skin crawling with the sensation of searing heat. "They don't feel nothing, honey, they're just bugs."

—mind turning away from the memory of the lethal contraption, you're back next to the pond, eyes on the smashed grasshopper in the weeds.

Does this tiny creature feel pain? Was it lying there now, aching, suffering a deep agony throughout its torn and twisted body? Or was the grandmother right? Frowning, you remember that your biology teacher never talked about the feelings of the various objects of study.

The loud man is shouting as he walks toward the house, "You better come across with the cash, Helena, or you and the shrimp will be at the bottom of that puddle."

The pond. You watch the glassy surface shiver under a sudden gust of wind.

With a graceful sweep of her hand, the mother trails her fingertips through the clear water, lifting them toward you, dripping with glittering coolness, to soothe your forehead.

It's so like all the hours she's spent at bedside, your legs arro-

gantly ignoring a desire that they should get better and grow. The steel braces waiting on the chair for when you're ready to walk.

She's softly speaking to you. "Don't you listen to that cretin, honey," drizzling water over your brow. "How's that feel?"

You close your eyes, water cascading over you, flooding your senses. You take a long, deep breath, and it's pulsing through gills—cool wetness surrounds you like a liquid aura, suddenly suspending you in a quiet world of gentle levitation.

—a flick of your tail!—surging forward, the foliage on the pond's bottom tickling your sleek belly as you glide swiftly through the water. A pause to reconnoiter, buoyed in a perfect state of dynamic poise—then off again!—the sound of water rushing by and the tingly feel of oxygen energizing your supple form, stunted legs no longer hindering, arms and hands transformed into—

A crawdad skitters across the sandy bottom near the shoreline, and you lower the left fin, the (suddenly staring into a textbook, scanning the anatomical reference beneath the transparent overlay—there!) *lateral* fin, and you turn toward the fleeing prey, swooping down through clear water, descending on the hapless crustacean, a churning sensation inside your open mouth.

The frantic crawdad stirs up clouds of sediment now with its hurried scrabbling, and at the last second you close your mouth and turn away, allowing the tiny creature to slip between some rocks.

"Honey, you all right?" the mother is asking.

—being eased up into a sitting position, aware now of the harsh sun punishing neck and arms, penetrating your closed eyelids. A drop of water runs into an eye socket and quickly becomes very warm.

"Does it hurt bad, Jesse?" the mother asks softly, tenderly wiping at your sore mouth with a tissue, a pink bubble of bloody saliva bursting.

You open your eyes, asking, "Can't we leave?"

Warm breath on your face as the mother leans close, whispering, "Tomorrow night, honey, promise. We'll leave late tomorrow night after he's gone to bed." Putting her finger lightly to her lips, smiling.

A pretty face fills your view, and you notice a small cut at the corner of the sometimes sad mouth and a bruised indentation on her chin. A sure feeling of connection seems to span the narrow space, but you still feel alone.

The dark sheen of the bulging underside reflects in the mirror,

looming immense; the red hourglass, infamous as a swastika, wordlessly shrieks a crimson warning.

It is wonderful, crawling up the slippery surface, magically gripping the cool glass with eight spindly legs. Now you're watching a shadow on the ceiling upstairs, having been carried back up to the bedroom on another stream of oscillating sensations. From beneath the sheet you think of spiders—and as quickly experience the awkward, stilted crawl over the impossibly smooth surface of the mirror—*back under the covers!*—then again on the glass; you are female and that feels odd—knowing, though, that the teacher in Santa Fe would say: “With the black widow the female of the species is the deadly one.”

—Back on the dining room ceiling now, and below is the man with the loud voice. The mother is in the kitchen, and you think of her as you secure the silken strand to the ceiling above the man and begin the descent, to use your lethal potency to liberate this household. To do it now.

“Owww!” the man screeches.

The mother appears at the doorway to the kitchen. She is probably staring at the man, a mixed expression on her face, hopeful and afraid, hand trembling as she pulls a dish towel through her fingers in tiny jerks.

“Goddamn tab,” the man snarls, flinging the aluminum ring across the room, twisting a Kleenex around his bloody finger.

And for some reason the pin-dropping sound of the beer tab rattling across the floor downstairs keeps repeating itself, echoing endlessly. Tightly, you cover your ears.

Now, biting a lip, staring at shadows on the bedroom ceiling and willing them to take a lethal form—to attack the man downstairs and bite him until he swells to bursting.

“Better listen up, bitch,” the man shouts. “Tell me where the goddamn money is or get ready to bury that kid.”

She probably turns—pauses to say something—but then just quietly goes back in the kitchen, now standing at the sink, imprisoned by faded yellow walls and grimy, once-white ceiling, hands clutching the edge of the worn counter as she stares at the rusty, dripping faucet, head down as though praying to a tarnished icon.

You wonder at all the people who lived lives or portions of their lives in this unfamiliar little house. You have trouble visualizing the place brand new, fresh paint and clean windows—impossible to imagine laughter or some hopeful woman whistling over her chores.

And after a while you sleep, suspended on a silken thread above a gaping black abyss. A hot wind pushes you into a slow pendulous movement as you stare upward through dark dreaming along a thin silver thread. It's beginning to fray where it's attached to the dining room ceiling. You no longer have eight clinging legs or liberating venom, you're just a boy, dangling.

—awakened in the night. Lying in the darkness, sheet-wrapped tightly around you from fitful turning, mind lost and wandering through a maze of dissociation, a strange rhythmic vibration/deep in your tiny chest.

When the father first brought you home, scared and trembling, the mother said you looked cold. Then decided that, no, that's not a chilly kitty, just a frightened one. The mother petting you with a single finger, so light, as though being stroked with a feather.

Suddenly, as though from far off, a concerted howl of fear and agony.

Pain explodes in your ribcage, and you're flying through the air, instinctively gathering four padded feet beneath you so as to land correctly and cushion the fall.

Confused, you unwrap yourself and hurriedly descend the stairs while gripping the railing for balance, rushing outside to the porch, scooping up the wounded female cat and scowling at the man. "Why'd you kick her?" you demand, oddly disoriented by the impossible sensation of having just picked yourself up.

"You're lucky it was that goddamn cat, kid—could've been you." His mean face is halved by shadow, this obscured part of his features akin to the darkness lying in wait beyond the arc of light.

There is the rustle of a small creature beneath some leaves below.

Being held in hot hands, you struggle to be let down, to pursue.

The loud man stomps back inside the house, his footsteps sounding like those distant rumblings heard in a dream about storms.

Gently putting the cat down, you move to the tree at the edge of the light and slide down the trunk with your back against the rough bark, relishing the pain as though it can hold you together, plopping onto the ground and sighing heavily, feeling your perception wavering again.

After investigating the leaves and finding nothing, you twine around the boy's ankles, purring.

You glance down and you look up—eyes meeting—and you're

wondering what it feels like to be a cat *and trying to imagine what it's like being a—*

You dig nails into your fevered palm, concentrating, wishing the cat wouldn't hunt birds, 'cause you like birds, but understanding that it's just in her nature *and now you're wishing you were big enough to hunt loud men.*

—the mother calling you back to bed.

Rising, you glance toward the toolshed—stumble, experiencing split perception, *seeing the shed from a ground-level view at the same time as you see the door handle of the shed.* You reach out . . .

Inside the house on the loft balcony, you stare down at the man below. He's shaking the mother, slapping her so hard her head snaps to the side. Roughly shoves her away.

Your palm feels cool for an instant against the metal container—pushing—a pungent torrent of pinkish liquid inundates the intruder below.

"Whaaat!" the man yells, his arms held stiffly away from his sides, staring down at himself, loudly sniffing the air—then, screaming in terror, he runs toward the front door.

—down the stairs and following the loud man outside, you somehow get past him and then turn abruptly, a stiff leg extended, tripping the man—

—he's falling down the porch stairs and onto the moon-shadowed lawn, the smell of gasoline heavy in the air.

The creature watched you run out of the house and trip the man—*still calmly watching the boy* as you ignore your bruised ankle and open the tiny book.

—and with trembling fingers tear off a match.

Sitting on the railing, your claws gripping tightly, you hear the mother yelling from far away, the cries echoing—but you can't understand the words.

Your hearing seems erratic—sounds are sometimes preternaturally loud, and sometimes there is only deathly quiet. *You watch the boy's wrist flick out.*

—a sudden loud whoosh!—harsh orange brightness—you cringe at the air-gasping screams and stare at the fiery teetering-about on the lawn—glance at the boy—

—amidst this apocalyptic horror you feel a memory of the father's comforting hand on your small shoulder.

Blinking, your gaze is drawn to the blaze, the bright glow narrow-

ing the vertical slits in your eyes as you feel the sensation of shriveling like a leaf blown too near a flame, suddenly seeing the horror from two different angles—experiencing complete mental separation—averting your eyes/your eyes, sinking into black nothingness.

....

The mother is stroking your brow with her soft hand. "It's all right, Jesse, it's over," sitting on the edge of the bed, gazing down, touching your cool forehead with her fingers, her face showing relief that the strange fever is gone.

In the corner a soil-clotted shovel leans against the wall. The first rays of this day's sunlight fall on the dirty implement like a silent accusation.

Your mother is telling you, "Honey, we need to go someplace now." Explaining the situation, how the future has opened and is waiting.

You feel reluctant to abandon the familiar confusion of your divided reality—something lingers, huddled within the vague confines of your experience.

After a moment, though, you feel your hand relax, slipping from hers, fingers languidly curled on the fresh white sheet. You take a deep breath through your mouth, feeling the cool air pass over moist lips, and a feeling of liberation expands your chest . . . you try to imagine what life will be like with all that money.

Then, remembering your father . . .

"If life is a desert, then love is the rain," he'd said, adding with a sly grin, "but a good strong cash flow can't hurt either."

Moving along the wall is the enlarged shadow of the cat, creeping slowly from one side of the room to the other as it passes by the window. You watch from within an unfamiliar feeling of separateness . . . wondering if this emptiness will ever be filled.

But then, again thinking of all that money, gently buffeted by the many possibilities, and safe within the boundaries called Jesse, you smile. . . .

FICTION

THE SHOOTERS

Marianne Strong



Illustration by David Monette

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 9/96

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My Aunt Chesla is a murderer, but I like her. So you will understand my dilemma about whether or not I should rat and turn her over to the police. You see, Aunt Chesla is no average murderer. She would never kill just for profit or for any other personal motive. When she murders, it is for righteous reasons. Like when she killed Allan Braddock, the duly elected councilman of the city of Bloomsville, Pennsylvania.

Braddock was found dead at the bottom of the baths, a magnificent rocky stretch of Solomon's Creek bordered on one side by a thirty-five foot cliff. When I heard about Braddock's death, I knew immediately that Aunt Chesla had sent him flying over the edge, and I knew why. But I couldn't make out how. How could Aunt Chesla, seventy-two years old, five feet three, and one hundred seventy pounds have murdered Braddock, six three, two hundred and ten pounds?

Besides, at the time of Braddock's death, Aunt Chesla was half a mile away in her own kitchen baking ginger cookies. For me. As a matter of fact, Aunt Chesla, having just put the cookies into the oven, was on the phone complaining again to the police about the neighborhood kids drinking down by Solomon's Creek.

But then Aunt Chesla always manages to be away from the scene where the murder occurs. What I couldn't understand was this: how can you be away from the scene if the method of murder is to shove the victim over a cliff?

Aunt Chesla disposed of Braddock in early September. At the time, I was up from Philly visiting my mother, lazing around before the fall semester of teaching started, and, as usual, fruitlessly fighting the guilt Mother was laying on me about visiting Aunt Chesla.

"Jo," Mother said one Tuesday, shaking her little head with its grey-black curls, "please visit your Aunt Chesla. She's lonely way up there. She's going to make you some ginger cookies before you leave, you know," Mother added by way of a bribe.

Now, in the first place, up there on Gilligan Road where Aunt Chesla lives she's only three miles from the center of Bloomsville. The local bus takes a mere twenty minutes to go from the door of her white clapboard house to the town square. Second, Aunt Chesla has two sisters-in-law living in Pittston, only ten miles up Interstate 81, and they are under orders to visit every other week.

I didn't say any of this to my mother. I'd already said it well over three hundred times during

the last ten years. Mother doesn't hear it. She still feels sorry for Aunt Chesla just for having outlived three husbands, none of whom had the balls or the bad sense to give her children.

So I gave in and made my usual mandatory visit to Aunt Chesla on a cool September day, a Tuesday, the day before Brad-dock got it. Aunt Chesla sat me down in her kitchen. Family always sit in the kitchen. The parlor is for guests.

Aunt Chesla was baking prune cookies and feeling very cheery. She had gone to St. Stanislaus at eight in the morning for a Mass. Just as she had suspected, Father Olshewski, the young blond priest, had celebrated the early Mass. Aunt Chesla likes Father Olshewski because he speaks loudly. Aunt Chesla is slightly hard of hearing, but she does not admit this. She says everyone mumbles.

"So where was Father Kulinski?" I asked, just to spite her. She disapproves of Father Kulinski.

"At eight? Still sleeping, you can be sure. A terrible waste of time." Turning away from her powdered sugar and dough, Aunt Chesla folded her arms across her flowered apron and stared at me. She knows I like to sleep late.

"Maybe Kulinski was up late reading Thomas Aquinas."

"Father Kulinski, Mary Josephine. You must use his proper title." She shook her head of orangy blonde curls at me. Unlike Mother, Aunt Chesla believes in keeping up her appearance. She has a standing appointment on Saturday mornings at Eva's House of Beauty. "Father Kulinski," she intoned, "is a priest and deserves proper respect. Even if he is breaking his vows."

"I respect him. I respect him," I protested, still bugging her. "I respect him even more than ever since you told me he's fooling around with the head of the Sodality of the Virgin Mary. Shows he has a sense of irony." I stretched my legs under Aunt Chesla's black and white porcelain-top table.

"He is committing a mortal sin, Mary Josephine."

"You can call me Jo," I said. I hate being called Mary Josephine, but I'd asked for it. Aunt Chesla always calls me that when I'm blasphemous. "Anyway, if he's committing a mortal sin, why should I respect him?"

"Sins of passion are lesser mortal sins. You know that very well from catechism."

"Yeah," I said. "Not like missing Mass."

"Did you go to Mass this Sunday? I know your mother wanted you to go. Don't lie to me,

Mary Josephine. I'll know if you're lying."

My mouth dropped open. "Jes—" I stopped. "Darn it, Aunt Chesla, I don't lie."

"You lied about stealing a dollar to go to the movies."

"For heaven's sake, that was thirty years ago. I was nine years old."

"You went to a condemned movie."

"Have you got any peanut butter cookies already made?" I refuse to argue any more about Elvis Presley movies with Aunt Chesla.

"Of course, Jo. I'll get them." Mention her baking or cooking and Aunt Chesla becomes Mother Teresa.

All sunshine and smiles now, she waltzed over to the shelf where she keeps her cookies, neatly wrapped in wax paper and stored in tin containers. Aunt Chesla is surprisingly light on her feet. So are charging rhinoceroses.

She took down the tin and was about to open it when something apparently caught her eye outside her window. Mother Teresa disappeared, replaced by the Grand Inquisitor. Judging by the expression on her face, either the neighborhood teenage thugs were stomping on the rhubarb or a local flasher was plying his trade in her yard.

I jumped up to see which it was.

"Don't push, Mary Josephine," Aunt Chesla said.

"Well, give me a look, too," I protested. I whistled. "Who the hell . . . uh, heck, is driving a Lincoln Town Car up Solomon's Road? It's a dead end up at the baths."

"That's young Braddock. Mr. Allan Braddock. Going up to the baths again. He comes up often now, at least once or twice a week."

I hadn't gotten a really good look at the driver, but I'd seen a mass of wavy gray hair. "He doesn't look that young," I said. "And who's Braddock anyway?"

Aunt Chesla shook her head at my ignorance. "He owns the A & B Construction Company, the one building those flimsy new vacation homes over at Glen Mountain. And he's one of Bloomsville's councilmen. His father Andrew owned Mountain Coal Company."

"Oh," I said. "That Braddock family. Of course." I'd been away too long. Everyone in Bloomsville had heard of Andrew McComb Braddock. Because he owned Mountain Coal Company, he'd owned Bloomsville. About three-fourths of Bloomsville's widows owed their status to the coal dust, explosions, and cave-ins in Mountain Coal mines.

"A lot of widows had to struggle, raising their children by themselves because of Mr. Braddock," Aunt Chesla said, reading my mind. "He is surely in hell."

"Well," I said, philosophically, "that was decades ago, thank God. The Braddocks are finished ravaging these towns and mountains. Can I have my cookies now?"

"Of course." She opened the tin, releasing the greatest smell in the whole world: peanut butter cookies.

I dipped my hand into the tin, nabbed five cookies, and went back to my chair. It's hard to think about suffering when you have Aunt Chesla's peanut butter cookies.

Aunt Chesla looked out the window again and then turned back to me. "No, Mary Josephine. The Braddocks are not finished." Her square face looked squarer and her big jaw bigger. "They are still doing evil."

I had a sudden fear for Allan Braddock. "What do you mean?" I asked, not even able to finish putting the first peanut butter cookie into my mouth.

"Young Mr. Braddock has been checking out Julia Sedock's property. He wants to buy it."

"Why, for Chri—for heaven's sake. What's its value?"

"He wants to put up a fancy restaurant and hotel there,

overlooking the baths. For Philadelphia people."

"Good," I said, chomping down on the cookie. "This town could use some action, and Mrs. Sedock could probably use the money. Tell her to sell, but to make Braddock pay top dollar."

"Julia Sedock does not wish to sell her home."

"Well, why not? It's just the usual two story clapboard. No architectural prize."

"Julia has lived there all her life. Her husband died in that house. After he'd been burned in old Mr. Braddock's mine."

"All the more reason to sell. Julia could move into a new apartment downtown and enjoy the rest of her life on Braddock money."

"She does not wish to take Braddock money, Mary Josephine. Remember that her son died in the mines, too. The year of the breaker explosion." Aunt Chesla shook her head slowly. "Twelve years old he was. Dead and no one to pay the price. He's buried up there near the creek. He and his father. Now Julia is being driven from her home and little Jimmie from his grave."

"How driven? If she won't sell, she won't sell."

"Mary Josephine, I don't know what all that education did for you."

"Got me out of Bloomsville," I muttered.

"You know all about the history of some foreign country, I suppose, but you don't know what's happening in front of you."

"England. I know all about England. I teach British history." For which Aunt Chesla considers me a traitor to the United States. "So tell me. What is happening in Bloomsville?"

"Young Mr. Braddock will have the city council rezone the property up there along Solomon's Creek. Then Julia won't be able to afford the taxes. She will have to sell."

I was beginning to share Aunt Chesla's contempt for Braddock and her concern for Julia Seddock. "Look," I said, "maybe I can talk to *The Citizen's News*. Maybe they can give Julia's plight some publicity. If enough flak is created, the council might back down."

"Mr. Braddock is very wealthy. And he owns *The Citizen's News*."

"Well, he doesn't own all the local papers, or the Wilkes-Barre paper or its news station. Maybe they'll be interested."

Aunt Chesla turned and stared out the window in the direction the Lincoln had disappeared. "No, there isn't time. Something will have to be done very soon."

I hadn't the courage to ask what. But I knew I had to do something before Aunt Chesla swung into action. I'd suspected for some time that she'd done in a child-and-wife-beating neighbor a few years ago. But luring a drunken sot to his death and killing Allan Braddock were two different things. How could Aunt Chesla actually kill Allan Braddock? She didn't own a gun. She wouldn't deliberately put poison in her cookies and send him a batch. She'd never risk her reputation as the best cook and baker in town. So what could she do? Push him over the edge of the cliff? I stopped chewing on my cookie. She just might try it.

I thought a minute and relaxed. He'd hear her coming. She couldn't maneuver her substantial body through the brush without alerting everything and everybody within two miles. At least I didn't think so. On the other hand, Aunt Chesla could do miraculous things when she set out to get somebody. Somewhere in the Roman Catholic list of saints for all causes was the patron of murderesses, and whoever she was, she was on Chesla's side.

I decided to go up to the baths to check out the terrain. And if Allan Braddock were still there, I could at least find out how serious he was about buying the

Sedock property. Maybe I could warn him away.

"I think I'll just take a stroll up to the baths," I said. "I haven't seen them in years."

"You can't go now, Jo. The prune cookies are just about done. You can help me take them off the cookie sheets." Aunt Chesla opened the door of a green wood cabinet, chose a blue ruffled apron from a rack of about twenty-five, every one stiff and spotless, and handed it to me. Aunt Chesla is the only woman I know who starches her aprons. She could stack them up like cookie sheets if she wanted to.

I got yelled at for flipping the cookies off the sheets too fast and for eating one while it was still hot, but I finished my job in record time and set out for the baths.

I cut up through the woods along the path where Aunt Chesla collects the mushrooms for her soup, the best mushroom soup in Pennsylvania. In ten minutes I came out at the Sedock property, near where it met state-owned property, and walked over the woodsy plateau that ended in the cliff overlooking the baths.

Allan Braddock wasn't there. If he had been, he'd have heard me. Even if I'd sneaked up on tiptoe, the branches and twigs of

the bushes would have betrayed my presence. Allan Braddock was safe from Aunt Chesla up here. Or so I thought:

Shuffling through some leaves that had already fallen in the cool weather, I moved on to an outcropping of Pennsylvania sandstone and looked over the edge. Depressions gouged in the creek's rock bed by glacial activity caught the water and then released it.

When I was a kid, one among dozens who played here, we didn't care how what we called "the baths" came to be. We just enjoyed them, graduating from the little depressions to the big ones as we grew. It was in one of those baths that I was first told Santa Claus didn't exist. And in another one I'd confessed to Judy Mancino that I thought her brother Robert was really cute.

I stood looking at the baths, reliving my childhood and hating the Braddock family. They'd diverted sulphur waters from the mines into Solomon's Creek. By the time I was fifteen, a snake couldn't have bathed in the creek. Well, there was no more mining, so the water flowed clear again and the baths looked good. I could see why Allan Braddock wanted the property. He could put up a honeymoon hotel here that would net him millions.

I headed back through the woods, then veered off toward the Sedock house, about a hundred yards from the overlook. I wanted to check on Aunt Chesla's facts. Not that she's ever been wrong. But habit makes me double check. Comes from grading too many student essays. After a while, you think *develop* really is spelled with an *e* on the end. So you have to check it.

A row of geraniums attracted my attention and led me to two headstones, small and sunk into the earth. Julia's husband and son. JAMES SEDOCK, SR. 1939. BELOVED HUSBAND. Sedock had emigrated from Slovakia and probably didn't know when he'd been born. The other stone read JAMES SEDOCK, JR. 1930-1942. BELOVED SON. REST IN PEACE. On the headstone the engraver had carved two angels hovering with outspread wings over the name.

I crossed myself, reverting as usual to old beliefs when I'm up in Bloomsville, then looked around quickly to make sure no one had seen me. I turned and walked toward the Sedock house.

Julia Sedock was sweeping her back porch. She had to be at least seventy-five, and she probably didn't weigh much more than her age, but she sent the dirt flying ten feet off the porch steps.

"Why, Jo," she said. "Now if you're going up to look at the baths, be careful."

I might have been twelve again, going to the overlook to see what boys had come up.

"I've been up already, Mrs. Sedock. I just thought I'd come by to visit."

Julia beamed. I expect she was reliving old times, too. She'd always had licorice for us kids and Band-Aids when needed. She leaned her broom against the porch wall and beckoned me up the steps. "Come in; come in. How is your mother?"

In a spotless living room festooned with lace doilies and decorated with anthracite coal carvings of miners and their mules, we chatted about Mother, Aunt Chesla, the heat, and the size of the blackberries this season before I got down to business. I asked Julia about Allan Braddock's offer to buy her property.

She stiffened. "He has offered me a very good price. But I want to stay here, Jo. I've lived here fifty-five years. You understand, don't you?"

I said I did. "If you don't mind, Mrs. Sedock, could you tell me how much Braddock is offering?"

"Well, of course. He's offered me fifty thousand dollars. I suppose it's a fair price. It's what others have offered. Hunters and all."

It was a tenth or less of what the property was worth, and mere pocket money compared to the profit Braddock would eventually see, the bastard.

"You won't sell, then?"

Julia folded her hands and planted them in the middle of her lap. "No. I don't want to sell to Mr. Braddock." Her head shook a little. "But if they raise my taxes too much . . ." She stopped.

I would have offered to give her the tax money myself, but if Allan Braddock wanted the property badly enough, he'd see to it that the taxes were beyond anyone's means. "Look, Mrs. Sedock," I said, "the days of mining companies' owning everybody and everything in town are over. If you don't want to sell, you won't have to. I know some people at the Darrenton and Wilkes-Barre newspapers and TV stations. Is it okay if I try to stir things up a little?"

Julia began rocking, hands still folded in her lap. "You're very nice, dear; to care. And your Aunt Chesla, too."

"Good," I said. "In the meantime, don't give in to Braddock."

"I won't move. I'm going to stay in my rocking chair. Mr. Braddock will have to carry me out himself."

"Great," I said. "What a picture that would make on the front page of a local paper. It'd

probably make the papers all the way to Philadelphia."

Julia smiled. "You're so like your Aunt Chesla, Jo. Always planning and doing."

I almost sold Julia Sedock out to Braddock for saying I was like Aunt Chesla. But I knew she didn't mean anything nasty. "Well, we'd best keep Aunt Chesla out of this, Mrs. Sedock. She's a bulldog when she gets hold of something."

"Now, Jo. Your aunt means well. She's very tenderhearted, you know. Yesterday she brought me some rhubarb pie. She remembers my little Jimmie from so long ago."

"Your son."

Julia nodded. "Your aunt made cookies for him. So long ago. Jimmie'd stop at your aunt's after work, all dirty and dusty from the breaker. Chesla never said anything about his tracking dirt into her kitchen. She'd just sit him down and give him his cookies." Julia rocked. "Chesla remembers my Jimmie."

I had the feeling that as long as Julia knew someone who remembered Jimmie, the boy stayed alive for her.

"Those are his marbles," Julia said.

"What?" I looked round.

Julia nodded toward a jar of mostly bright yellow marbles, including shooters, sitting on a

wooden table by the window. "Yellow was his favorite. So bright after that dark breaker. I gave Chesla a handful of the marbles yesterday because she remembers Jimmie."

Julia rocked and looked at the marbles.

I said my goodbyes and tip-toed out, leaving her alone with her memories.

When I got back to Aunt Chesla's, the old girl was down the cellar rummaging around in the jars of weed killer and rat poison. Even more ominous, she had put her recipe for powdered fried doughnuts out on the table. I couldn't guess how she planned to get Braddock to eat one, but she'd manage.

It took me about thirty seconds to yell goodbye and dash out of the house to my car. I raced the Civic's motor and hurtled down to the center of Bloomsville. I wanted to warn Allan Braddock to stay away from Julia Sedock and from Aunt Chesla, too.

I went over to *The Citizen's News*, figuring they might know the whereabouts of their owner. A young man earnestly trying to talk a funeral home into putting an ad in the paper stopped his work long enough to tell me that Braddock might be at the municipal offices.

I headed over there, parked

my car in the visitors' lot, and put a dime in the meter, noting that I had purchased an hour. Bloomsville has its good points.

Inside the grey stone building that looked like a jail as well as a municipal building, probably because it was both, I wandered down a corridor, sticking my head into offices. At the second to last office, I hit paydirt. A sign on an inner office read COUNCILMAN BRADDOCK.

A pleasant looking woman, about the size of Aunt Chesla but a lot softer looking, was working at a computer. She wore a blouse with gingerbread men on it, and matching gingerbread men dangled from her ears. Actually, she looked a little like a gingerbread person herself: round head, round eyes, round nose. Even her perfume smelled a little like ginger. Damned if my mouth wasn't watering.

"Ur," I grunted.

Her smile completed the gingerbread person look. "May I help you?"

I'd expected her to start singing "On the Good Ship Lollipop." I would have joined in.

When I told her who I wanted to see, her round eyes got rounder. "Why, you're very lucky. Mr. Braddock is in today, but I'm afraid he's not seeing anyone."

"My name is Lasick. Ms. La-

sick. Tell him I represent Julia Sedock. I think he'll see me."

The gingerbread person looked as if she'd come slightly unbaked, but she wrote my name on a piece of paper and carried it into Braddock's office. When she came out, she looked fully baked again. "Why, you're *very* lucky. He does have a spare minute to see you."

"I thought so," I muttered.

Allan Braddock looked in his fifties, handsome and in good shape. Silver gray hair, a strong jaw, and blue eyes. On his desk lay two stacks of papers, edges lined up neatly. The computer on the side of his desk had a list of figures running across the green screen.

Braddock wasted no time on cordialities. He gestured me into a chair and asked in what capacity I represented Julia Sedock.

"As her agent," I said.

"What kind of agent? Real estate?"

"Her personal agent," I said boldly.

"Have you power of attorney for her?"

"Not yet. But I will," I lied.

"Well, when you do, you can speak to my attorneys."

"Just one question now, Mr. Braddock."

"One," he said. He turned his head to the left and stared at

the row of figures on his computer.

"Do you know how many acres Julia Sedock owns?"

He turned his head back to me with a surprised look. "That information is available at the county courthouse."

"Yes, I know. But do *you* know how many acres she owns?"

"Yes."

"How many?"

"Ten point three. And that is your one question."

"That's okay," I said. "It's told me what I want to know."

"Has it now, Miss . . ." He consulted the paper his secretary had written my name on. "Miss Lasick. You are this Miss Lasick, I presume?"

"Yes, I am." I reached over and tilted the wooden nameplate with the goldplate letters. "You are this Mr. Braddock, aren't you?"

He sat back with a contemptuous look on his face and swung his chair from side to side. "Miss Lasick, I'm a busy man. What is it you want?"

"Julia Sedock doesn't want to sell. So I'd like you to let her live in peace."

"I am offering Mrs. Sedock a very good price. No one else will offer her a better one. With the money from the sale of the land, she can move into an apartment, which at her age is more suitable for her. Sooner or later

Mrs. Sedock will see the good sense of that."

"And if she doesn't?"

"I hope that you are not doing her the disservice of talking her out of selling. I . . ."

"Did you know," I interrupted, "that there are two graves on the property near the overlook?"

Braddock looked surprised again and a little bothered. Apparently he'd never even noticed the graves. I wondered if Bloomsville had on the books some law about not disturbing graves. I was tempted to claim it did.

"The graves belong to Julia's son and husband," I said. "Check for yourself. Take notice of the dates. You might be interested in when and where they died."

Braddock looked uncomfortable for about ten seconds. Then his face smoothed out again. "I intend to buy the adjoining property from the state," he said. "My surveyors will determine exact borders the day after tomorrow. If there are graves near the overlook, Miss Lasick, my surveyors will determine exactly on what property they lie. Either way I will build, whether or not Mrs. Sedock sells. I intend to give her one more chance tomorrow to sell at the price I offered. I hope you won't persuade her to reject an offer that will only benefit her."

I didn't waste my breath telling Braddock that he had no right to decide what was best for Julia Sedock. I had another problem now. I had to keep him away from Julia Sedock's property. If Aunt Chesla saw Braddock up there the day after tomorrow, she might kill him one way or another. She'd said she'd have to do something very soon, and she would. I decided to play for time. "Come on Thursday with your surveyors if you like, Mr. Braddock. But in all fairness I must warn you that I will be up there with a reporter from the Wilkes-Barre newspaper. You might not like the resulting headlines: 'Bloomsville Woman Orders City Councilman Off Property,' or 'Bloomsville Councilman Plans to Disturb Graves.'"

I got up and left. I knew now, from Braddock's answer to my question about the size of Julia's property, how serious he was about getting the land sooner or later. He knew the exact number of acres, and likely the exact dimensions. He knew he needed all the property, Julia's and the state's, to build a hotel of any size. I was also pretty sure I'd bought some time. Braddock was the type who would like to avoid nasty publicity. He'd delay his visit with the surveyors. I'd kept Braddock away from Aunt Chesla for a while and given

myself time to see if I could make good on my threat and interest reporters in the story.

I was up bright and early at the unholy hour of nine the next morning because Aunt Chesla phoned me. What she wanted scared me into sitting bolt upright in bed.

She demanded that I stand ready to drive her back home at three o'clock, after a visit downtown, but she declined to tell me the purpose of her visit. I figured that if she wouldn't tell me what errand she had it was because the errand had something to do with rubbing out Braddock. I thought of those powdered fried doughnuts and the weed killer. God, Aunt Chesla would get life.

"Look, Aunt Chesla," I said, "I saw Braddock myself yesterday. He was going to meet his surveyors at the baths on Thursday. But I told him about the graves and told him that some reporters might find his disturbing the dead a good angle for a story, so I think he'll back off for a while. Now, you back off, too, okay?"

Aunt Chesla agreed.

I'd bested Aunt Chesla for the first time in my life. God, I felt good. I could do anything.

I decided to haul myself out of bed and get started even though the weatherman was predicting

rain, my favorite kind of weather in which to loll in bed.

By three that afternoon, I'd talked to every employee of the Darrenton *Citizen's Messenger* from the manager and editor to the mailboys. Everybody listened; some even asked questions. But no one would agree to go out to interview Julia Sedock and to take a few pictures. Apparently the Braddock family still owned half of eastern Pennsylvania, not just Blooms-ville. I'd made a strategic mistake and lost a day. I'd have to travel to Wilkes-Barre to get some action. I decided to head back to Blooms-ville, telephone for an appointment with a reporter from Wilkes-Barre, and have an early supper.

I was cutting up the last of my salmon croquettes, a specialty of Lahr's Diner, when I heard the news.

Clara Prater burst in, her face red. Clara works in the the Blooms-ville and Darrenton Hospital. When her face is red, she has emergency room news. She propels her five foot two lithe frame as fast as possible to Lahr's with details of broken legs, heart attacks, concussions, and speculations on their probable causes.

Perched on her usual stool at the front of the diner, Clara ordered a Greek salad and a bowl

of vegetable soup while everyone waited.

Then she bent over and rubbed her left leg. "These veins," she said pitifully. "I don't know how much longer I can work in the emergency room."

About a hundred years, I thought. Or until one of your audiences kills you. Whichever comes first.

"What a day," Clara groaned. "I suppose you've all heard the news."

Fifteen heads shook no.

"Allan Braddock." Clara reached for the cup the waitress put in front of her. She sipped at the coffee, an impossibly loud, vulgar, long sip. "Allan Braddock," she repeated. "They brought him in."

"Allan Braddock?" I croaked. "What happened to him?"

Clara turned slowly toward me. "I'm sorry, dear. Did you ask something?"

Fifteen pairs of eyes glared at me. I understood that questions were not to be asked at this point. "Nothing," I said. "Not me. Nothing."

"About, let's see." Clara checked her watch. "About eleven they brought him in. I was checking little Sammy Morton in. He'd stuck his hand into a bottle of orange juice again. They took Mr. Braddock upstairs right away. But I was the one to hold the elevator doors

open for the ambulance litter." Clara shook her head, her face tragic. "I could have told them it was useless." She sighed. "I've seen enough in my day."

"You mean," the man in the booth next to mine ventured, "he's dead?"

Clara glared at him. "Oh yes. Word didn't come down for half an hour. But I knew. All broken up he was, bones, skull, everything. I don't know how the undertaker's going to make him look good in the casket."

"Will you tell us what happened to him, Clara?"

Apparently the waitress had worded the question properly because Clara smiled and nodded. "He fell. Up at the baths. Fell thirty feet and bounced off the rocks."

I managed to swallow some water. "Who pu—, uh, I mean, do you know who found him?"

"Some men working for Mr. Braddock. Servers, they were. They spotted him. Right after he fell."

I heard the woman in the booth behind me mumble, "Servers?"

"Surveyors, I think," I whispered to her. I wanted to ask Clara if she knew whether they'd arrested Aunt Chesla yet. But I held my tongue. Maybe the surveyors hadn't seen her. Maybe she hadn't done it. Fat chance, I thought. But how the

hell had she done it? I paid for my salmon croquettes and left. Clara was giving details on the broken bones.

I played the scene ten different ways in my head as I drove up to the baths. How had she sneaked up behind him without his hearing her? Or had she come up, offered him a peanut butter cookie to put him off guard, and then shoved him over? Maybe she'd used a classic method like hitting him on the head with a rock first. I tried to remember exactly what the rock outcropping looked like. Maybe she'd tied a string from one tree to another to trip him up.

I parked my car near Aunt Chesla's house and cut up through the woods to the baths. The path was still a little damp from the morning rain. There were footprints here and there, but I had no way of knowing whether they had been made by Aunt Chesla. I didn't think I'd be lucky, or unlucky, enough to find a piece of her apron clinging conveniently to a blackberry branch, so I didn't bother to look.

I came to the sandstone outcropping and walked out onto it. No string. No sign of a struggle except for one thing: a swath of crushed and torn leaves from the middle of the rock to the edge. Someone had slipped.

I wiped the sweat from my face. Aunt Chesla was innocent, the old dear. Braddock had slipped on the wet leaves.

I took three steps back and stumbled. I dropped to the rock, slipping a little toward the edge but stopping well short.

A bright yellow rock had spun out from under my foot. It pinged off another rock six feet away and shot back to rest against my ribs.

I picked it up. A yellow marble.

I got up and looked around on the rock, kicking aside leaves. I checked the brush within seven feet. But I doubted I'd find another marble. Aunt Chesla would have picked up any Braddock hadn't taken down with him to the rocks below. She wouldn't want anybody innocent to die.

But she'd missed this one. One of Jimmie's marbles, given to her because she remembered the boy who'd died in the breaker.

I looked at the marble in my hand. Maybe Julia had put the marbles there, but I doubted it. The whole business had Aunt Chesla's *modus operandi* written all over it. She'd probably been in the kitchen baking my promised ginger cookies, seen Braddock heading up to the baths, cut up through the woods herself, put the marbles under

the leaves, and returned home to phone the police about noisy teenagers at just about the time Braddock would have walked out onto the rocks and onto those marbles. She'd have known from previous complaints that the police would take hours to come up if they came at all. Either way, she had the perfect alibi.

And I'd been the one to let her know that Braddock would be at the baths today. I'd told her that he'd never noticed the graves. Of course he'd want to see if I were lying or not, and to find out in time to get a story ready for the reporters I threatened to bring.

Naturally he'd decided not to wait until Thursday. Aunt Chesla had figured that out and watched for him.

I wondered if that made me an accessory. I stared at the marble for about ten minutes, then threw it into the baths. One marble didn't prove anything anyway, and, besides, I couldn't see dragging poor Julia into a murder trial. After all, she'd only provided the weapon.

"Rest in peace, Jimmie," I said and turned toward Aunt Chesla's, wondering how many centuries I'd serve in purgatory for not turning in the old girl.

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FICTION

DOUBLE FEATURE

Larry Tritten

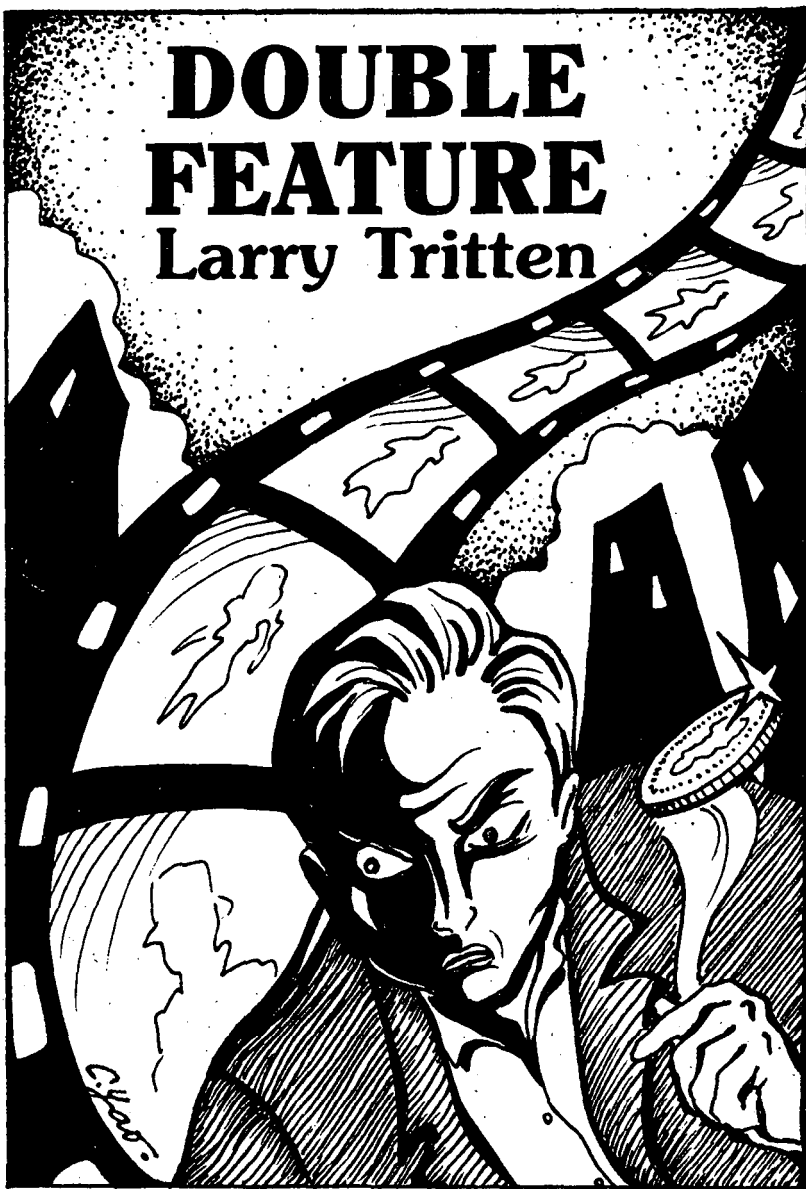


Illustration by Carolina Yao

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 9/96

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This is a true story, not science fiction or fantasy, but of course no one will believe that. What most readers will believe is that the story is yet another unpredictable turn from an established film critic who recently startled his readers by suddenly beginning to espouse attitudes and ideas completely antithetical to those he built his reputation on. But I'm a different Benjamin Eastland, the *other* Benjamin Eastland is dead, and although I mean this literally and not figuratively, and am about to tell you truthfully exactly how I was responsible for his death, the oddball irony is that it will be thought to be no more than the fanciful construct of this story. I'm reminded of those scenes in movies in which someone confesses a crime or misdeed to incredulous listeners only to be humored—as Katie Johnson was, for instance, as the little old lady in *The Ladykillers* who goes to the police station to tell them about ending up with the dead gangsters' money and is gently turned away by a disbelieving and bemused officer who tells her not to worry about returning it.

The genesis of this story is the movies. The astute will have noticed that lately in my pieces I've tended to use the word *movies* instead of the word

films. The latter, which the other Benjamin Eastland tended to belabor, seems to me somewhat pretentious. I think of the scene in *Annie Hall* in which Annie and Alvy are waiting in line at the Beekman Theater to see *The Sorrow and the Pity* behind a boor who is loudly pontificating to his date about the films of Fellini and the theories of McLuhan. Alvy becomes progressively more anguished until he can't stand it any more and objects, whereupon the boor proclaims with *ex cathedra* authority that his ideas are authenticated by the fact that he teaches a course called TV Media and Culture at Columbia. At that point Alvy magically produces Marshall McLuhan himself, who tells the boor that he knows nothing of his work and is amazed that he ever got to teach a course in anything. For me the word *films* has an undertow of affectation. It brings to mind all of those redoubtably sober and programmatic types who drone on relentlessly about the film as art. It brings to mind critics like Benjamin Eastland. Him, not me.

I like movies. I always have. All kinds of movies. B movies. Ambitious artistic movies. Porn movies. Home movies. You name it. When I was a kid, I used to go to two theaters in a row on the weekend and some-

times to three, which is how many there were in my hometown, getting movie drunk. I remember how fascinating film, the raw stuff of movies, was to me then. I had a View-Master, of course, and I remember having a ring I'd probably sent in a couple of boxtops and twenty-five cents for that was an example of pure primitivist cinematic exoticism: it came with a small strip of film that one drew slowly through it while peering into a tiny viewing aperture to see pictures of marines in action in the South Pacific (the single frame that I clearly recall was a photograph of marines with K-9 Corps dogs on Bougainville). I also remember discovering several pieces of film (with perhaps eight or ten frames on each strip) in a trashcan behind the Roxy one afternoon—film that had for one reason or another been excised from the print of the current program; holding those strips up to the light to see whatever images they proffered (Tim Holt? Joanne Dru? Phil Spitalny and the Hour of Charm All Girl Orchestra?) was pure enchantment. When we were shown a movie in school, I sometimes turned and looked at the film unwinding from reel to reel with a steady, rickety, whirring sound, feeling a quiet sense of wonder at the magical process, an intuitive perception of McLu-

han's description of the movies "by which we roll up the real world on a spool in order to unwind it as a magic carpet of fantasy." I've written somewhere that film is superior to videotape because you can hold a strip of film up to the light and see Mickey Mouse or Seka, while acknowledging that another person might argue that videotape is better because you can hold a strip of videotape up to the light and *avoid* seeing Ronald Reagan or Shelley Winters. The line is humorous, but it invokes that exoticism of film that I've always felt.

I pretty much summed up my life as a moviegoer in my first column as a reviewer of X-rated movies for the sex paper, *The Brand X Paper*, that I used to write for:

"What's a nice guy like me doing in a place like this?

"X-rated movies are for the most part dismissed, ignored, or disparaged by the major league movie critics, and I'm not at all uncomfortable on their turf. I was paying twelve cents to see the original *films noir* at the Dream and the Roxy in my hometown when the founders of the Cahiers du Cinema were skipping flat stones across the Seine for their amusement. I was being terrified by Lon Chaney, Jr., and Rondo Hattan before Christopher Lee ever

crawled out of his coffin. I'm a veteran of the Saturday afternoon matinees of the forties, unnumbered showings of *Potemkin* in film classes, and studio screenings of the fresh product at the Writer's and Director's Guild theaters in Hollywood. I've broken Tobler in dreary art theaters and am as sensitive to the differences between Antonioni and Fellini as a gourmet is to those between rigatoni and fedellini.

"But I'm also interested in pornographic movies, and I can't imagine any critic's not being interested in them, any more than I can imagine their not being interested in horror movies or pure camp. We can learn things about ourselves from these off-beat and subsidiary genres that we can't learn from the polite cinema—if only because they go after more basic reactions: excitement and arousal. Besides, it's outside the mainstream that some of the most exotic and memorable fish are found." Et cetera.

Now you're thinking that Benjamin Eastland would *never* review an X-rated movie. And undoubtedly *he* wouldn't have. But I welcomed the carte-blanche given me by the editor of *The Brand X Paper* to write about porn movies with the same consciousness of craft I would bring to writing about regular movies,

particularly because most such publications require a crude hack approach reflecting the premise that libidinal interests and intellectual interests are mutually exclusive. Pornography is surely the ultimate behavioral phenomenology, and movies are our most popular art. What bonanzas of insight might porn moves yield as a bonus to the sexual stimulation! Not, however, for a stuffy, dogmatic intellectual like Benjamin Eastland.

Him, not me.

The first movie critic to really turn me on was James Agee, whose appeal was an almost boyish enthusiasm revved up by a first-rate intellect and style. The source of Agee's criticism was a genuine love of movies, and he wrote about them with empathy and a sort of impassioned delectation, looking for what was good rather than gleefully declaiming what was bad; even in the worst movies he could find something worthy: a single performance, perhaps, or moments of shining dialogue. Whereas those like (the other) Benjamin Eastland, whose source of criticism is the ego and the authority of the critical position rather than the pleasure of movies, tend to be scalphunters. They are very hard to please, not so much because there is so little pleasure to be found in

movies (if that is so, doesn't it make their position ludicrous, like that of, say, a gourmet who consents to subsist on grocery store fare?), but because there is more savor for them in a negative review, more notoriety in being obdurate.

These are incredible sentiments, you must be thinking, coming from Benjamin Eastland, the man whose cynical reputation was virtually canonized when a famous actress, infuriated by a cruel review that had disparaged her looks as well as her acting, dumped a plate of *osso buco* in his lap in a famous restaurant. But that was not *me*. While that Benjamin Eastland was writing his reviews for *The National Observer*, I was writing articles and fiction and humor and my column for *The Brand X Paper*. Bear with me, I'm getting to the point. . . .

Like many moviegoers of my generation, I lament the televisionification of movies. I remember when movie theaters were palaces—architectural pop hybrids of Byzantium, ancient Egypt, Rome, Greece, and the Arabian Nights—indeed, the proper ambience for dreams and fantasy. But today they have the character of bureaucratic offices—clinical cubes of glass and concrete and AstroTurf carpeting, and most of them small enough to fit into the lobbies of

the Orpheums and Foxes of the past. It started a few years ago with the mitotic dividing of older theaters into duplex houses. Now theaters tend to be multiplex complexes, cold and stark as ice cube trays and fluorescent lamps. With screens half, a third, a fourth the size of those of the past.

Yet one lives in the present, and while I'm certifiably nostalgic about the way things used to be, I take advantage of what technology has made possible. I have an expensive VCR and a twenty-four inch Sony, and I regularly rent movies and watch them; although, while most VCR owners are basically concerned with renting current movies and look forward to the availability of the most recent titles, I concentrate on vintage stuff. Most of the bigger videotape rental stores have a fairly good selection of older movies, but a while back I discovered the absolutely ultimate place for the movie nostalgist. The shop is called Original Cine, a little place downtown in the Tenderloin sandwiched inconspicuously between a shabby and neglected Greek restaurant and a cell-sized space whose tattered drapes and foggy windows give a patchy view of dust-mantled display cases that once held the homemade candies of a German confectioner who kept

the shop going for thirty years before retiring.

What makes Original Cine so fascinating is that, in addition to plenty of the usual classic movies, it has a huge selection of the truly rare.

Where else would you get something like *Dance Hall Racket*, an almost unheard of 1951 movie starring Lenny Bruce as a knife murderer?

Or *Black Market Babies*, an old wartime Monogram movie starring Frank Morgan (the venerable Wizard of Oz) as a doctor who delivers the black market babies of unwed mothers and sells them?

Or *Pin Down Girl*, a 1948 movie about women wrestlers starring a woman who was the wrestling champion of Mexico?

Or *Harlem on the Prairie*, a 1937 exploitation movie that was billed as "the World's First Outdoor Action Adventure with an All-Negro Cast"?

Or *The Story of DE-733*, a wartime training film made by Paramount in which Keefe Brasselle is a sailor who catches gonorrhea?

Ever since I discovered Original Cine I rarely go to any of the neighborhood rental places any more, except when I'm looking for a relatively standard movie or an X-rated one. The difference between the ordinary places and a shop like Original

Cine is somewhat analogous to the difference between one of the chain bookstores like B. Dalton or Crown Books and the kind of bookstore that carries rare books, old prints and maps, and manuscripts. I think of the chain bookstores, convenient as they are for buying new books and paperbacks, as deserving the generic name McBook.

As for Original Cine, I quickly became a regular customer, and I looked forward with each visit to finding out what unlikely titles had been added to its constantly growing stock. I had been going there for about two months when the strange events that form the heart of this story began to unfold.

It was a Saturday afternoon, and I was in the doldrums—specifically a mild post-creative languor left in the wake of finishing a short story. Sometimes one finishes a story with a glow of accomplishment and confidence, other times with the nagging suspicion that something about it is not quite right; and sometimes what one has done seems cryptic and resistant to evaluation, possibly good, possibly lousy. This was one of those stories, and it had put me into one of those heightened, hyper-aware, existential moods. I had poured myself a glass of wine, carried it to the front window, and put it down on the sill.

Looking into it in the light coming through the window and illuminating the transparent white wine, I could see drops of moisture adhering to the inside of the glass contrasted with the patterns of my fingerprints on the outside surface of the glass, which in tandem gave me the impression of reticulated quicksilver. I thought aimlessly of subatomic worlds where unfathomable creatures enacted incomprehensible approximations of our basic acts—copulation, homicide, rising to the alarm clock in the morning. A bit of angst crept like a shiny black bug from under the bedrock of my subconscious and came up irrepressibly to trundle about in the loam of my mood. I sighed. At times like this, I knew, I needed to lighten up. I knew that for me the antidote for angst tended to be nostalgia. I thought of Original Cine. I would rent a couple of lively vintage movies and accompany them with burgers and fries. An excellent plan. The gloom would lift from my mind like the fog at Bastogne, and I would be relieved by flights of fancy as powerful as the planes that went to the rescue of the besieged 101st Airborne Division.

That analogy brought to mind one of my favorite movies, *Battleground*, and I decided that I would rent it as well as one oth-

er—a comedy or a musical. I hadn't seen *Battleground* for two or three years, although I had probably seen it more than twenty times since that first time in 1949 when it had thrilled my prepubescent mind and stirred my blood with its simple and unvarnished soldier's eye view of the 101st Airborne's heroic stand at Bastogne during the Battle of the Bulge. For three years following the war, while America passed through a period of forgetting and readjustment, Hollywood hadn't made a single war movie—then came *Battleground* and *Sands of Iwo Jima* in 1949, the first post-war war movies made as the nation's willingness to recollect the great drama of the war returned. Both of them had a stunning impact on me at the time because they suddenly proffered the unfamiliar exoticism of spectacular events for years ignored (three years is a long time when you're prepubescent) and because they were superior to most of the war movies made during the war, which resided in my young mind like the memory of fascinating dreams. Both movies were icons of my youth. *Sands of Iwo Jima* is the more pyrotechnical of the two, but there is a quiet naturalism and quality of characterization in *Battleground* that made me realize

(even as a boy) that it was a more textured and richer movie.

I finished my glass of wine, took the bus downtown, and walked the five blocks from Market Street to Original Cine. The fringes of its faded candy-striped awning fluttered in the cold pre-winter wind that swept the street as I went inside. There were no customers in the shop, and I noticed at once that, for the first time, the owner, with whom I'd developed a casual conversational relationship, was not behind the counter. In his place was a plumpish young man, slightly pale but with a lively look in his eyes, wearing an unbuttoned red and white checked shirt over a T-shirt whose visible part disclosed a fragmentary view of a golden spaceship in a blue stellar void.

"Hi," he said, and I nodded, and a few moments later he added, "Help you?"

"Oh, I'll look around," I said, and then, deciding to invoke some status, "Where's Charlie?"

"His mother got sick," the clerk said, getting me in perspective as a regular, and I nodded with suitable gravity. I turned to browse among the tape boxes on the wall. Original Cine is a crypt or, if you will, a sanctum—a single room of modest size but with all the space used well: behind the counter, filed on shelves, are scores of

boxes of movie stills, publicity photos, and posters—tens of thousands of them apparently (suppose you wanted, say, a still from *Hold That Ghost* with Abbott and Costello or an eight by ten glossy of Louise Brooks or Fuzzy Knight—*voilà!*); the counter itself contains display boxes of the rarest tapes in the shop; and the walls are covered with sensational posters for movies like *Secrets of a High-school Girl*, *Blood Feast*, *The Incredibly Strange Creatures Who Stopped Living and Became Mixed-Up Zombies*, and *Revenge of the Virgins*. Half of one wall is also devoted to a display of tape boxes, which I now studied with the avidity of a scholar in the stacks.

I rented *Battleground* and (because of its mixture of kinetic music and ebullient humor no less than its glorious old Technicolor) *The Girl Can't Help It*, another favorite and one that perfectly evokes the sweet zany joy of the fifties. I hadn't seen *The Girl Can't Help It* for something like six or seven years, but if there ever was a dyed-in-the-wool upper, this was certainly it: Fats Domino, Little Richard, and Gene Vincent (among others) in their youthful prime; Jayne Mansfield, charming and a terrific sight in her best part as Georgie, the opulent but innocent girl who wants a family

instead of a singing career; Tom Ewell and Edmund O'Brien really cooking; Frank Tashlin directing at his very pop-culturish best.

I returned to the apartment in a state of pleasant anticipation and called the pizza place a few blocks away where they make a great cheeseburger and first-rate french fries, ordered same, then set out on foot to pick them up. When I got back, I laid out the repast on the living room floor, put *The Girl Can't Help It* in the VCR, and went with the spirit.

An unsentimental gargoyle like Benjamin Eastland (*him*) would probably have considered *The Girl Can't Help It* trivial and silly, claiming that low comedy and popular music are too unsophisticated to qualify as art. I doubt that the other Benjamin Eastland would have liked *Battleground* either. He was a hard man to please, and he often built castles of rhetoric just to sustain dungeons in which to imprison the spirit of pleasure. I think *Battleground* is an excellent movie; but since it is also a nostalgic icon, it is in a way beyond criticism to my mind, and watching it is a sort of ritual.

On this night while watching it I encountered something extraordinary. In *Battleground* Van Johnson plays a character

named Holly. He first appears in a scene in which he returns to his unit after having been wounded, abruptly entering a tent where his buddies are quartered. His name is used several times during the ensuing conversation. I watched in amazement as the familiar scene progressed because this time his buddies were calling him by a different name, Wilder. I watched the rest of the movie in a sort of trance, and throughout, in scene after scene, Johnson was referred to as Wilder. As well as in the credits. Except for this, the movie was just as I'd always remembered it. The more I thought about it, the more bewildered I became. I was as certain of my memory of the name Holly as I was of my own. To my boyish ear it was a particularly pleasing name—for years I assumed that it was a first name, although subsequently it occurred to me that the other characters in the movie were all identified by their last names. In any case, the name was a familiar part of my consciousness. If the character had been a secondary one or peripheral to the story, I could suppose that somehow I had sustained a wrong memory over the years, but Holly was basically the lead character and his name was spoken repeatedly. The only

possible explanation was that for some reason all the scenes in which Van Johnson's character's name was spoken were shot in alternative versions and a separate print had been made and had been virtually undistributed. Yet why would such a thing have been done? It seemed so unlikely that the question followed me into a restless sleep that night.

The next morning I woke to an almost instant troubled memory of the puzzle; which, it seemed, had even infiltrated my dreamless sleep with its mystery, and in the brightness of the day it virtually shimmered in my mind. By noon I was on my way to Original Cine.

The same clerk was behind the counter, and he recognized me, greeting me with a casual, "Hi," which I returned. Just as casually I drifted over to the wall display and began to study the array of colorful tape boxes with abstracted interest. I didn't know what I was looking for, but a sense of imminent discovery seemed almost preternaturally to compel my attention, like the subliminal whisper of riches from the earth and streams to a seasoned prospector. My gaze moved methodically from box to box until I noticed the box for *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. I became almost instantly aware that there was

something wrong with the happy octet (Snow and Dwarfs) portrayed on the box. It was the dwarves. It's easy to identify the dwarves because the characteristics for which each is named are manifested in their appearance. Sleepy has the baggy-eyed look of an insomniac; Happy beams with joy; Doc has spectacles and an avuncular look; Grumpy scowls implacably; Sneezy has a red nose and is poised on the brink of a sneeze; Bashful's shyness shows in his blush, effeminate eyelashes, timid downward glances, and awkward posture; and Dopey, who always seemed to me an animated incarnation of Harpo Marx, has a dopey look and is lost in outsize clothing. I singled out, quickly and easily, Happy, Sleepy, Doc, and Grumpy. But that left three dwarves who were distinctly *not* Bashful, Sneezy, and Dopey. One of them, hat in hand, was conspicuously bald; another struck me as projecting a furtive or fidgety appearance; and the third, who was shorter and fatter than the others, had no strongly identifiable characteristic to my eye.

After a while I casually asked the clerk for *Snow White*, giving him the code number. While he went to get the tape from an area behind the counter where tall storage shelves led back to a narrow dusky corridor and a

door to somewhere, I looked at the tape boxes of rare items in the counter display case: Ed Wood's *Girl Gang*, *The Sensational Lily St. Cyr* (two volumes—color), *Classic Car Commercials*, *The Lemon Grove Kids Meet the Monsters*, *Test Tube Babies*, and so on.

I left the shop with a high sense of anticipation, great enough, in fact, to make me impulsively hail a passing cab rather than walk back down to Market and wait for a bus or a streetcar.

At home I opened a cold bottle of Rolling Rock, carried it into the living room, and set the bottle on the VCR while I fed in the tape.

I sat back as the movie began and waited patiently for the moment when the dwarves first appear, working in their diamond mine. From that moment until the end of the movie I sat watching in dismay, and when it was over, I noticed that in my raptness I hadn't even touched the beer, which I suddenly turned to as if it were tranquilizing balm.

The movie was just as I remembered it from my childhood, with one—or I guess I should say *three*—exceptions. Bashful, Sneazy, and Dopey had been replaced by dwarves named Wheezy, Baldy, and Jumpy. Wheezy was, as I said, fatter and a little shorter than the oth-

ers; Jumpy was chronically edgy and restless; and Baldy exhibited Bashful's timidity. The differences they brought to the movie, as nearly as I could tell, were subtle and slight, with Wheezy understudying Dopey's comedy relief.

I took the tape out of the VCR and put it beside the tape of *Battleground*. They looked just like any other videotape cassettes. But they were not. I was privy to something fantastic and unaccountable here, something whose meaning and explanation I had not an inkling of. A mystery that had to be solved.

There was, of course, only one place to seek that resolution. At Original Cine. But how exactly should I go about it? I decided, finally, to trust to a certain improvisational instinct, to approach the matter directly.

The next day at noon, leaving the tapes in my apartment, I returned to Original Cine, where I was surprised to see that Charlie was back behind the counter. He is forty-fivish, with the kind of rough-hewn, craggy features that have typecast many a screen actor as a heavy and then enabled them to evolve into macho leading man parts; he had a lion's mane of unruly blond hair and wore a gray wool beret, battered black leather jacket, white ribbed crewneck

sweater, and dowdy gray sweat pants. His gaze met mine immediately and something passed between us, but what I couldn't fathom.

"Hi, Charlie," I said.

"Hello. . . ." There was a quality of stone in his glance. I made a pretense of studying the tape boxes on the wall, standing obliquely in relation to Charlie, who after a few moments said, "Looking for anything special?"

I found myself saying, as smoothly and calculatedly as a perfect tennis serve, "No . . . but *this* is certainly the place to find it." And I turned to glance at him, his expression still a mask of detachment. "I've been in a vintage Disney mood lately," I went on. "Picked up *Snow White* here the other day . . ."

I had the impression of his detachment wavering. "Have you ever seen *Victory Through Air Power*, the propaganda film they made during the war? I know you're a connoisseur of war stuff . . ."

"That's one I've always looked for," I said. "Have you got it?"

"Did *Snow White* hold up in your memory?" he asked, ignoring my question.

I looked at him pointblank then. "Yeah, it's great. . . . Can you name the Seven Dwarfs?"

"Can you?"

"Sure. Happy, Sleepy, Doc,

Grumpy . . . uh, Wheezy, Baldy, and Jumpy."

Charlie came around from behind the counter and turned the OPEN sign on the door around, pulled the green shade down over the glass. He went back behind the counter and said, "Did you bring back the tape?"

"No," I said, and my expression solicited an explanation.

But this was a cat and mouse game all the way. "What did you think of the film?"

"It's inexplicable," I said. "I don't know what to think. Or about *Battleground* . . ."

"You caught that, too?" He sighed.

I waited. For a moment it seemed as if we were two figures in a wax museum. Finally Charlie said, "Private stuff. I got a call that my mother had a stroke. I was so shaken up that I hurried out of here and left unboxed tapes of *Battleground* and *Snow White* on the table next to a few new titles that were ready to be displayed when I was gone. There were also four others. You rented two of the six. Ralph put them out with the new titles. Coincidence."

"How do you explain the movies?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said wearily. "How do you explain the Bermuda Triangle?"

"Where did you get them?"

He didn't answer.

"I mean, this is *bizarre*. How do you account for it?"

"I don't." His tone was stubborn now, on the edge of irritation.

"Aren't you curious?"

He clearly knew more than he was saying. "I wonder what *Entertainment Tonight* would make of them," I said. "There's got to be an explanation."

"Why don't you just bring the tapes back?" Charlie said, not without tension.

Now it was my turn to be silent.

"Mexican standoff, huh?" He sighed again and said, "Maybe you'd rather not get into this ..."

Enigma, and now the intimation of melodrama. I felt vaguely like someone in a *film noir*, being drawn into a web of intrigue, the tapes at the heart of a mystery, sought by various shadowy characters.

Suddenly Charlie shrugged, his expression resigned. "Curiosity killed the cat," he said. But there was no threat in the remark, just an undertow of cautionary advice. "I don't give a damn," he went on. "Maybe you'd like to share a secret, a secret that'll change your life forever. Or would you like to *withdraw now*?"

The question was left hanging, with its portentous implication, but I didn't say anything

even though I felt a small chill of apprehension.

"Can you keep a secret?" Charlie asked tonelessly.

The question brought a hint of a smile to my lips. "I was in the ASA," I said.

"The ASA?"

"The Army Security Agency. I had a Top Secret-Cryptologic clearance. Red hot secrets were my daily fare."

Charlie looked at me thoughtfully. He said, "If you check it out—and it's a matter of record, of *history*—as of 1934, in the early production stages of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the Seven Dwarfs were, at that point, Sleepy, Happy, Doc, Grumpy . . . Baldy, Jumpy, and Wheezy. The last three, of course, were ultimately changed to Bashful, Sneezzy, and Dopey. . . ." His eyes met mine as he went on with quiet deliberation, "But that was *here* . . ."

I didn't understand that last part at all, and something had crept into his tone and manner that struck me as foreboding; an impulse almost made me turn and leave the shop, but for better or worse, I ignored it.

"Do you remember the old Fox Theater on Market Street?" Charlie asked.

I remembered the Fox, although not with impeccable nostalgic clarity. It was one of the grand movie palaces to

which I referred earlier (the largest movie theater west of the Mississippi, I remember reading somewhere), and it had been demolished the year I moved to San Francisco, 1963—a bad year for San Francisco nostalgists: Alcatraz was evacuated, and the old President burlesque theater closed. During visits to the city I had been to the Fox three or four times before it closed in 1961. Where the Fox stood we now have Fox Plaza, which consists of a high-rise and a complex of shops I've never felt the urge to visit.

"I was there a few times before it closed," I said.

"I used to go there as a kid," Charlie said. "That was in the fifties, after its heyday. But still. It was *some place*." He smiled in remembrance. "I remember what it was like to stand in that fantastic lobby under the three golden domes with the huge bronze and glass chandeliers, getting high on all the carved gold and metal leaf, the squadrons of cupids and cherubs on the ceiling and every wall, and going up the grand staircase past the candelabras . . . and the labyrinth of halls and lounges, with statues and sofas and tables all over the place, all bronze and gold, and the tapestries and oil paintings—satin and silk and velvet everywhere, and all those *tassels*!" Charlie sighed again

but this time with pleasure. "I used to think it was like walking around inside a huge candy box, that's how it seemed to me as a kid. . . . In its heyday, you know, the Fox had seven floors of dressing rooms for stage entertainers, a phone system with seventy-seven phones, even an emergency hospital with its own staff, and there were secret passageways, rooms, and hidden stairways—just like the Winchester Mystery House. The Hayes Valley River flowed under the building's foundation, and the Fox had its own thirty thousand gallon emergency water supply. Most of the furniture was from France and Italy, and those chandeliers were over ten feet tall. That's the way they built theaters in 1929. Quite a bit different from the mall-world conglomerates, huh?"

"Quite a bit," I agreed.

Charlie took a coin out of his pocket and held it up for a moment between thumb and forefinger before abruptly tossing it to me.

"What's this?" I asked, pleased with my skillful catch.

"Take a look."

"A silver dollar. Dated 1929."

"Right. It's the kind coin collectors call the Peace type. Check a catalogue and you'll find that they stopped making them in 1928, and then started again in 1934. *Here*, that is . . ."

I looked at him blankly.

"I was at the Fox the last night it was open. At some point that evening I went wandering through the place, reminiscing. I took a turn down a corridor I didn't remember ever noticing and found one of those neglected stairways, followed it, and ended up in a little room—a plush sofa and a table were in there covered with dust, it looked like nobody had been there for maybe years. While I was snooping around, something caught my eye just at the edge of the carpet. It was this coin. I like to think it was lost there that same year, 1929, the year the Fox opened. By someone who was at both openings."

"Both openings?"

"It's a key," Charlie said cryptically, nodding toward the coin.

"A key?" I held the coin up, looking at it. "What do you mean?"

"A key to the Fox, which is still there. *There*, I mean, not here."

"How is it a key?"

"*Feel* it." There was a quiet, urgent authority in his tone.

I held the coin lightly between my thumb and my forefinger and middle finger while he watched me, and then I felt it, what he was talking about; it brought back a boyhood memory of putting my ear to a railroad track on a hot summer day and

picking up the subliminal vibration of a distant train, a subtle little subaudible humming that could almost be felt in the charged iron.

"Yeah," I said, surprised, looking at him. "I feel *something*."

Charlie gave me a mock-nefarious grin. "Now it starts getting weird," he said with relish. "Now it starts to turn into a fantasy . . . but you're a writer and a movie fan, so you've got plenty of precedent. Stop and think about by what simple means people tended to get to all those fanciful and lost worlds in the movies and science fiction stories. Dorothy got back to Kansas just by wishing she was there, although it took a tornado to get her to Oz. Alice fell down a rabbit hole, went through a looking glass. Others are struck by lightning or fly into a purple cloud or just go into a trance or fall asleep and wake up *there*. So this coin fits right into the scheme. A silver dollar dated 1929, and it has the power to take you to another version of now, one where movie history is just a little bit different, although most things are pretty much the same as here, though not—" he smiled "*—entirely*."

Uneasily I started to give Charlie back the coin, but he held up his palms. "No. Keep it,

partner. You wanted to know about those tapes, and you will. I haven't felt normal since this crazy adventure started, and maybe it's because I've had to carry the whole incredible burden myself psychologically. Kind of like being stuck with the sole responsibility for keeping a fabulous secret. But I'm *tired* of that. I'm tired of feeling like I'm living in a dream. Lately I've had the feeling that if I don't share this with somebody it'll start to eat me up. So maybe your coming here is *providence*."

Throughout this monologue I felt a strange anxiety, its intensity exacerbated by the indisputable existence of the tapes. The very real tapes. Charlie told me the rest of it then. In a measured and quietly impassioned voice he told me how he had gone to Fox Plaza one afternoon and had walked slowly around the block where the great theater once stood, turning the coin slowly in his fingers and reminiscing about the theater and generally about the theaters and the movies of the past—and the second time around the block something extraordinary had happened. He'd had a sense of passing through some alien medium, a momentary sensation something like walking under water, his senses muted, and then he had found himself standing in front of the Fox The-

ater—but not in the past. Here. But *another* here and now, one whose familiarity he would soon learn was modified in numerous and mostly subtle ways only distinguishable by careful observation. Few of the differences were as major as the existence of the theater, although many of them in some way involved the world of the movies.

That first visit to the other place had been a fearful and virtually hallucinatory experience, mitigated only by the quick discovery that getting back was as simple as getting there—a matter of turning the warm and vital coin in his hand while invoking a montage of nostalgic memories.

His second visit had lasted a couple of hours, and in that time, while walking through the downtown area and browsing through shops and stores, he had noticed only three differences—the uniforms of the cable car crews were green instead of brown, the *e* and *i* were reversed in the first name on the Neiman-Marcus store off Union Square (he had made a point of learning the correct spelling once after an argument about it with a friend), and in Woolworth's a girl was standing just inside the main doors selling ice cream sandwiches (a Neapolitan brick between two blond wafers) from a freezer, this latter a tra-

dition that had been discontinued long ago and one that he (and I) remembered fondly.

On the third trip Charlie had spent a lot of time in bookstores, paying special attention to the film sections, and had discovered that there Dorothy Malone instead of Ellen Burstyn had played Cybill Shepherd's mother in *The Last Picture Show*; Doris Day instead of Anne Bancroft had played Mrs. Robinson in *The Graduate*; and in 1965 *Darling* had won the Oscar for Best Picture instead of *The Sound of Music*. It was on this visit that Charlie had given in to curiosity—he wanted to see if his shop was there and, finding that it was, approached it warily, fleeing in fear when through the window he caught a clear glimpse of himself behind the counter.

On that third visit he had begun to record all the differences he discovered, and now, a few weeks later, there were scores of them chronicled in a small notebook that he laid on the counter before me.

"Looking for them," he concluded, "reminded me of those features they used to run in comic books—'How many elves can you find in this picture?' Remember those?"

I did. The elves (cats, Indians, or whatever) were drawn by the artist so that they cleverly

blended into the foliage of trees, the billowy shapes of clouds, or whatever.

Charlie gave me a penetrating look. "And now if you're thinking I'm crazy," he said, "all you have to do is prove it. The opportunity is in your hands. Be my guest." His smile was humorless. "Then come back and talk to me."

You can imagine with what a mixture of feelings—incredulity, a sense of absurdity, and yet an undercurrent of uneasy anticipation because of the undeniable existence of the tapes—I accepted his invitation.

On Market Street, between Ninth and Tenth streets, on the block where once the rococo facade of the Fox Theater loomed above the sidewalk like the entrance to a palace of a French Bourbon king, Fox Plaza is a dreary heir to the space. The rectangle of a twenty-five story highrise stands against the sky, loftier but far less imposing than the grand theater, its exterior bleakly stone-colored. The first several floors are occupied by offices through whose unopenable windows can be seen the square orange grids of ceiling lights, and the upper floors are expensive apartments with uniformly curtained windows and narrow little balconies penned in with prison bar railings. At the base of the highrise,

ugly concrete banks with tall curtain-shrouded windows flank a complex of shops: inside broad corridors lead from a festively bright open air candy kiosk past boxlike glassed-in spaces containing a pharmacy, a shoestore, a jewelry shop, a florist, the Columbia School of Broadcasting, a grocery and liquor store, a restaurant, and so forth; in the central area, adjacent to the elevators, a modest fountain spills its water upward from a bundle of curving black metal rods, occupying perhaps the very same space where the sweeping staircase once led up to the opulent grandeur of the Fox's interior.

I found myself walking around these stark buildings on the red brick sidewalk, coin in hand, trying to remember the Fox as I had known it. I felt as foolish as I had expected to in spite of telling myself that in the best spirit of skeptical objectivity I was merely giving Charlie's delusion the proper context for nullification.

It happened so suddenly that I wasn't even able to gauge the sensations that accompanied the transition. One moment I was in the shadow of the First Interstate Bank, and the next I was looking up at the elegant Fox sign that rose above the theater's marquee.

A weakness invaded my legs, and a sense of vertigo made my

head reel. I walked unsteadily to a nearby stone slab that served on this block (*here as well as there*) as sitting space for people waiting for a bus. As I sat down a No. 7 Haight bus pulled up to the curb, and a few people hurried to board it. Nothing unusual about the bus or the people. Or the appearance of Market Street in either direction. Yet just behind me the Fox Theater exquisitely stood.

In time I gathered the resolve to wander along Market Street in the direction of the center of town. Only a few minutes had passed before I noticed an unfamiliar sign in the window of a familiar drugstore. It was an ad for Green River, an exotic fountain soda drink I remembered from my childhood but which I think disappeared sometime back in the fifties or maybe sixties. *That's one elf*, I thought.

I continued to walk, but not with any clear idea of where I was going, and as I pondered the irrefutable palpability of the world around me and ruled out any doubt that the experience I was having was illusory, anxiety suddenly broke over my mind like a wave. I wanted to get back, and I was about to turn and head for the theater when I glanced at the public library building two blocks up from Market and had a curious thought. Calming a little, I

changed course for the library. In my world when I went to the main library, it was an intermittent habit of mine to check the fiction section to see if the two novels of mine that they had were in or out at the time—it was hard to resist keeping tabs on their general appeal. I had done this just four days earlier, finding both books on their shelves, and remembered that *A Streetcar Named Desire Under the Elms* had last been checked out two weeks earlier on October seventh, and that *The Frozen Reservoir Bucket Brigade* had last been checked out on September eleventh.

The library looked no different—a huge gray stone edifice with the usual scattering of derelicts and winos loitering on the strips of lawn along one side. I've always wondered why they are attracted to the place. I went through the entrance door, ascended the long broad stone stairway under the high, cavernous ceiling to the second floor, and entered the Literature, Philosophy, and Religion section, going directly to the familiar shelf where my books were kept. But they weren't there, either of them. After a moment of consideration, I went into the room where the central card catalogue was and looked myself up. One book was listed

under my name: *Artists, Aborigines, and Assassins*.

Intrigued, I went downstairs to the Art and Music department, where I found the book on its shelf. A chill passed through me as I recognized a photograph of myself glumly regarding the prospective reader from the back of the dust jacket. The copy tersely described me: "Benjamin Eastland is film critic for the *National Observer* and the author of a previous book of film criticism, *Autopsies in the Dark*. He lives in San Francisco and dislikes popcorn and jubes."

Stunned, I took the book to the table. The introduction prepared me for what I found in the text—it was a luridly smug and pontifical statement of the author's messianic role in the salvation of film as art. I leafed through the reviews, entranced. Virtually everything there was contrary to my own ideas and sensibilities. Frank Capra and John Ford were dismissed as mawkish boors, John Huston was judged to have no stylistic integrity, MGM musicals were decreed tasteless cinematic confectionery. And so on.

He (I?) was insufferable. Most of the things he cited as artistically worthy were obscure and unseeable—a Brazilian *cinéma vérité* about the French restaurants of Rio; a Syrian documen-

tary on Hittite monuments; an American a capella musical based on *The Confessions of Felix Krull*. That sort of thing.

I read for half an hour or so and finally closed the book, staring at the likeness of myself on the dust jacket and pondering the extent of my distaste for everything I had read. I must, I told myself, be having a lucid dream, one of those dreams that parapsychologists describe as being so realistic that all the senses are present. It's only a dream, I said to myself, and with that I left the library, hurrying back toward the theater. It was early evening now, that twilight time when cars are beginning to switch on their lights and the gray of the sky deepens suddenly into darkness. The coin was in my hand as I crossed the street to the block behind the theater. In the windblown canyon of that back street, between the back of the Fox and the back of the Civic Auditorium, there was no pedestrian or car traffic, although just around the corner the lights and activity of Market Street were bringing the night to life.

"Hey, there, *scuzzball!*"

I didn't even see who it was who hit me, and my next memory was of leaning against the back of the theater for support as I tried to reorganize my thoughts. My impression was of

having been knocked down and only partially out, and as my mind cleared, my first thought was a jolting realization that I had been mugged—my wallet was gone. And so was the silver dollar!

I began to walk aimlessly, almost somnambulistically, my confusion building into fear. The lights of the city—street lamps, neon, car lights—loomed and swam gelatinously around me as I continued along, improvising my course. In this state I walked through the Tenderloin and across the busy thoroughfare of Powell Street, with its bell-ringing, tourist-thronged cable cars, toward North Beach. Gradually the world around me assumed an astonishing clarity, and I was overwhelmed by the undeniable reality of it. I was not dreaming, I gradually understood, this was really happening. The awareness was a chilling reiteration of Mia Farrow's line in *Rosemary's Baby* when her consciousness sluggishly transcends the drug she has been given and she perceives that Satan is copulating with her: "*This is no dream—this is really happening!*"

Sometime later I found myself sitting on a bench on the edge of Washington Square in North Beach. I had a pocketful of change (two dollars and thirty-eight cents) and my keys.

My keys. I got up, walked to a phone booth, and looked through the tattered and partially eviscerated phone book that hung on a chain. There was my name, and the familiar phone number, my own, and my address, the same. I put two dimes in the phone and dialed the number. A voice, my own but straitened with humorless formality, said, "Hello, this is Benjamin Eastland. I'll be out of town for a couple of days, but please leave your name and number and I'll get back to you . . . the Muses willing."

At this point I had no plan of any kind, but I knew, through a sort of haze, where I was going.

I caught a bus back downtown, transferred to an N Judah streetcar in the underground station, and sat watching my reflection in the window as it took me through the tunnel and out toward the Avenues through an older, conventional streetcar tunnel while I observed all the while that nothing was unfamiliar. I got off the streetcar at Stanyan and walked the three blocks up to my (?) building. My key opened the door to the apartment, and taking a deep breath, I reached inside for the switch to the stairway light, turning it on. I went up the long flight of steps with the familiar, slightly frayed green carpeting

and at the top of the stairs turned on the hallway light.

I walked through the place, turning on the lights in every room. It was not *my* apartment: instead of my funky, conventional kitchen there was a futuristic chamber of austere gleaming metallic surfaces, polished glass cabinets exhibiting expensive steel and crystal implements, utensils, and dishes. In the bedroom my waterbed had been replaced by an elegant draped Federal-style four-poster bed, and the closet was full of suits and sports coats and neckties instead of jeans and shirts. The living room had a black leather sofa and vinyl strap chairs with aluminum frames instead of my old plush roll-arm sofa and two director's chairs; and throughout the place, everywhere, plants of every kind hung and lurked and erupted from corners, whereas I had no plants at all. But the books throughout the apartment illustrated most perfectly the differences between us. In fiction my taste is highly eclectic but the emphasis is on modern literature, mainstream and genre stuff, but here were almost exclusively classics, antiquarian esoterica, and ultra-highbrow modern favorites. While I liked maverick and leftist-oriented writers, he seemed to cherish establishmentarian

and conservative types; and while my choice of magazines ranged from *Hustler* to *Vanity Fair*, the ones arranged on his coffee table seemed to have been carefully chosen to reflect a precisely genteel taste: *House and Garden*, *The American Scholar*, *Audubon*, *The Atlantic*, *Vanity Fair*, *Town and Country*.

I don't know how long I spent going from room to room and noting every little detail (such as the fact that every single one of the prints and paintings in the place was nonobjective art), but eventually I was drawn from my preoccupation with a start when I realized that someone had opened the front door and was coming up the stairs. I had been in the office dabbling with the word processor (I'd never been able to afford one and still used a manual typewriter), and I bolted into the hallway just in time to come eye to eye with Eastland as he put down his suitcase and stood at the top of the steps. His expression when he saw me was a flamboyantly grotesque mask of shock and disbelief. I made some half-formed gesture, not knowing what to do or say, and in that instant he propelled himself backward, terrified, half throwing up an arm as if to fend off a blow, and then his foot twisted, his leg buckled, and he went toppling awkwardly backward down the

stairs, banging and clunking against both walls as he fell. When he stopped tumbling, he lay jammed in an ungainly heap on the steps. His eyes, as I knelt over him, opened for just long enough to show mystified recognition mixed with complete fear, and then closed.

I couldn't have invented a more expedient resolution for my dilemma if this were fiction, but it isn't, so I'll omit how I disposed of the body. I don't intend to plead the truth to the extent of providing a *corpus delicti* that could invite manslaughter charges against me. I will say that the task was easier than I had thought it would be, since in this world Benjamin Eastland owns a BMW (I didn't used to have a car), and as I transported his body, I felt just like the protagonist in one of those vintage Hitchcock TV shows, so many of which revolved around just such a problem.

At first I wanted to get back to my familiar life badly, and I ran an ad offering a two thousand dollar reward (my bank account is *much* larger here) for the lost coin in all the local papers, but without any response. Then I accepted my fate, realizing how fortunate I really was to be able to resume a life and a career. Those I am recreating in accordance with my values. The people who knew Benjamin East-

land here will tell you how eccentric I have become, but no matter—most of them aren't my kind anyway, and I'm making new friends.

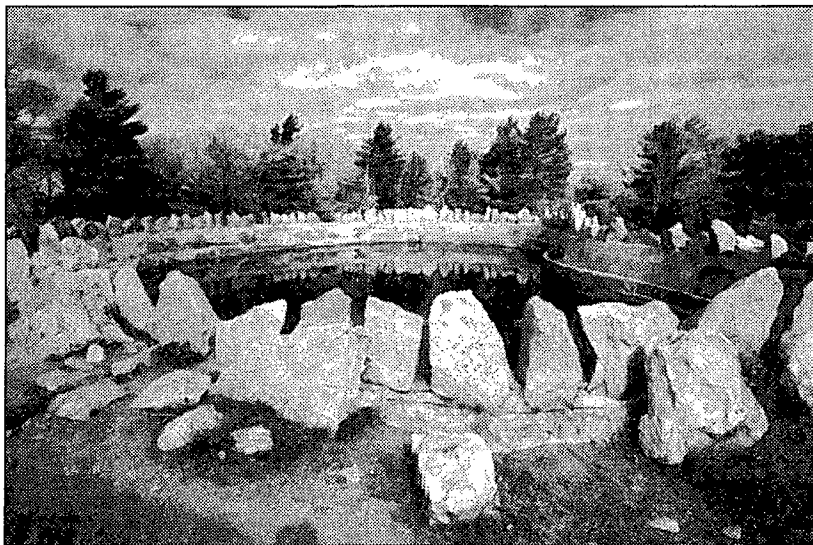
So far I've avoided the temptation to go to Original Cine. I'll save that for a time when I've made a more secure and comfortable adjustment to my new life. I wonder what (the other) Charlie must think about my not returning, but I suspect that he is probably relieved to have his life return to normal.

As I finish telling this story, I leave it to you, the reader, to decide what to make of it. Since I'm scripting it for Rod Serling's *Twilight Zone* TV series (and have already discussed the idea with him), it will seem clear that it is science fiction. But I assure you it isn't. By writing it, I'm fulfilling one of my basic intellectual convictions—that the

truth should be known; and while I make that observation in the knowledge that this truth will be thought to be a cleverly constructed, verisimilitudinous fiction, I have performed the intellectual duty of telling it and satisfied my writer's confessional impulse in the bargain. Your credulity or incredulity is your own affair.

In the meantime, I'm a movie critic now, but I'm also writing humor and fiction (not *this*, however). One of my pastimes is looking for new elves, and I list them all in a notebook. I go to the Fox Theater often and, in fact, am going there tonight for a première I wouldn't miss for anything. It's Marilyn Monroe's new movie, *An American in Brooklyn*, directed by Woody Allen, and believe me she's more beautiful than ever these days.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

Rock band. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020. Please label your entry "September Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the April Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.

FICTION

Mountain Law

David K.
Harford

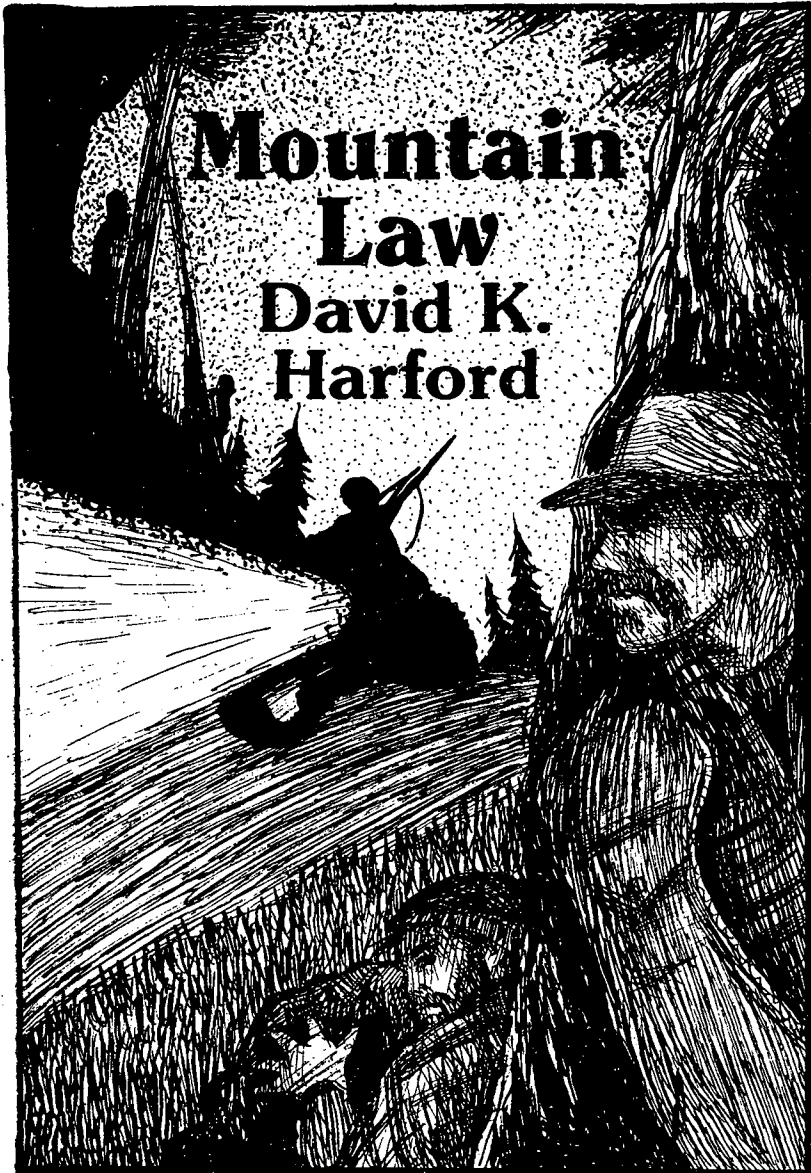


Illustration by Mark Penta

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 9/96

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THE CRIME

We were taking a break in Longstreet's yard when Tom Folley pulled up in Longstreet's driveway.

Longstreet, perched on one of the lengthy logs he and Feldman had just rolled out from the pile, sat smoking a cigarette. Feldman was next to him hunched over his chain saw, sharpening it, running the small file an equal number of raspy strokes down each tooth of the blade, hitting each at the proper angle every time.

I was over with Smitty near the hydraulic wood splitter we'd been running, drinking a beer I'd just drawn from the nearby keg. Paul Dempsy, fool that he was, was trying to be nonchalant about following Longstreet's wife around as she went in and out of the house, checking on the firewood-cutting party, bringing sandwiches, seeing that the wood we cut and split was stacked all right on the porch, toting and stacking quite a bit of it herself.

Mary was a worker, no doubt, and cuter than a speckled pup—blue-eyed, a reckless mane of fluffy blonde hair flying everywhere across the soft skin of her face, and built like a magazine model, the kind of girl any man would fantasize about, especial-

ly in those tight jeans. But fantasizing was as far any reasonably sane man in Westline would ever let it go, knowing Longstreet the way we did, jealous guy that he was.

Dempsy didn't know Longstreet all that well, though. To make matters worse, Longstreet and Mary were having problems at the moment, and everyone except a newcomer to Westline like Dempsy knew when a man and his wife were having problems you stayed out of it so you didn't suddenly become part of the problem.

Dempsy had some lessons to learn in this regard, and we were all confident he'd catch on in a few weeks—about the time Longstreet jammed the barrel of his .44 Mag up Dempsy's nostril. In this backwoods town, where everyone was your neighbor and folks sometimes had to rely on one another (like we were doing just then, helping Longstreet split his wood), deep in the folds of the northern Allegheny Mountains of Pennsylvania, messing where you shouldn't be messing could get you shot—or worse, make you wish you'd been shot. Somehow, some way, you'd be punished. That's an unwritten law here.

But at that moment no one cared about Dempsy's foolishness.

Instead, all eyes were turned

to Tom Folley as he stepped from his official vehicle in full uniform and leaned on his truck with his beefy, bare arms resting across the hot hood.

No one as much as twitched. Of course no one ran. None of us were doing anything wrong—not right then anyway—that would make us run from Wildlife Conservation Officer Tom Folley. Not that this game warden hadn't chased us before, mind you. Longstreet summed it all up when he said to Folley, "You know, Tom, I'd forgotten what you look like when you're breathing normal and not right directly behind me."

Folley bowed his head, laughing lightly. He might have taken it as a compliment that he must be doing his job, chasing after guys like us who were known to pop a deer now and again regardless of the month or season when our freezers were empty. (It was common knowledge that we liked our deer meat like we liked our morning eggs—poached.) But the rest of us knew Longstreet was really giving Folley a playful jab. We all knew Folley hadn't actually chased anyone in the last few years. He was getting too fat and too old, too bureaucratic and too near retirement to be chasing folks through the woods, up and down the steep mountainsides.

Longstreet glanced over, frowning as Dempsy whispered something in Mary's ear. She giggled.

"Nice pile of pole logs," Folley said. He motioned with his head at the pile of oak, cherry, and hard maple logs, half of which we'd already cut, split, and stacked. The late summer air was heavy with the smell of approaching autumn, the sweet scent of freshly cut wood filling the air. There's no surer sign of autumn coming than the smell of firewood being cut and split, mixed with the sound of chain saws being revved.

Longstreet stood and brushed wood chips from his pants and out of his hair. "Picked out the logs myself," he said. "But I know you didn't drive out here to comment on my firewood. So what is it exactly that brings you to Sherwood Forest this fine August afternoon, Mr. Sheriff of Nottingham? No one here's been poaching the king's deer. Not today anyway."

A game warden in among the poachers, that's what we had there; the law in among the lawless. And I suppose both sides were feeling a little awkward about it, except maybe for Longstreet.

Longstreet moved towards the beer keg. "Mary," he told his wife, "get me my beer mug

that's got them hunting dogs on it."

A pile of large plastic cups sat stacked near Longstreet.

Dutifully Mary rose from the porch where she'd been sitting next to Dempsey and went in through the screen door.

As Dempsey rose to follow her, Longstreet said, "She can get it herself, Dempsey. She don't need your help. You've been following her around like she's in heat." The bluntness in his voice sat Dempsey back down on the porch pronto.

(All right, class, please open your texts to page thirty-two.) The learning process was beginning for Dempsey. The Westline school district was in session.

"I got me a problem," Tom Folley was saying, studying the age lines on his hands and unaware of the small drama playing out between Longstreet and Dempsey.

"Don't we all," Longstreet said. He handed Dempsey a plastic cup of beer. It was a gesture of friendship and gratitude for Dempsey's helping split the firewood, however shallow that gesture may have been. "Not that most problems aren't fixable. Isn't that true, Dempsey?"

But Dempsey didn't answer. Tom Folley did. "Well, this particular problem I've got could concern all you guys here."

"Oh?" Longstreet pinned Fol-

ley back with a steady, penetrating gaze until Mary returned, filled her husband's mug with beer, and handed it to him. He took a long, much-needed swig, wiped foam from his lips, then pulled his wife in close to him.

"You guys been finding any dead bears in your wanderings around the woods these days?" Folley was asking.

No one said anything. No one was willing to commit themselves one way or another about being out in the woods, especially to Tom Folley; leastwise, not until Folley explained further.

Which he did in one hurried breath. "I've been finding bear carcasses, some already half rotted away, the last one a fresh kill, lying dead up this hollow, down that hollow, all around the Allegheny National Forest here." Folley removed his wide-brimmed hat and set it on his truck hood.

"How's that concern—"

The game warden raised his arm, signaling he wasn't done talking yet. "Each of them wasted black bears had its gall bladder cut out. They took some hindquarter meat off some. Even skinned two of them. But the gall bladders—this last one I found was a mother and two cubs. Gall bladder gone from both them cubs, too."

"Hmm," Smitty grunted into his cup of beer. "That don't

hardly seem right. Left most of the hide, meat, and everything? Wasteful, man," he said, "damn wasteful."

Folley's head was bobbing in agreement so hard I thought it might topple off his shoulders. "Not to mention a tad out of season," he added.

"You know it ain't us, Tom." Feldman finished filling his chain saw with gas and moved towards the keg. "We don't care much for bear meat. Now, venison, that's a different story."

"I know it's not you guys. You guys wouldn't even know what a gall bladder looks like, much less where in the guts it was."

Folley was capable of a few jabs himself.

"Isn't the gall bladder from black bears some sort of potent medicine in Japan or somewhere?" Longstreet returned to the log pile. Mary went over and sat next to her husband, laying a hand on his thigh.

"That it is. Actually it's the bile they're after. And bear meat's a big delicacy. And the hides have value. I've had it put to me that if a guy took and sold everything off a bear, he could get twenty thousand. Reports are, they're doing this up in Canada, too. Killing bears for the gall bladder, meat, hide, shipping them to the Far East, getting big bucks for them. I'm

not sure if this down here is part of that up in Canada, but—"

"How's this concern us?" Longstreet asked. "Seems it's your problem; you might have to do some legitimate work for once."

Folley sighed and looked skyward as if what he wanted to say was written up there. "I'll tell you how it concerns you," he said finally. "From what I can tell, this guy or guys, or hey, even a female—you never know—" (Folley sighted right in on Mary, her silky wisps of yellow hair gleaming bright in the sunlight.) "—he or she goes out with one of them small portable grills. He strikes it up and loads it with a few pounds of bacon. With that bacon sizzling, every bear within fifty miles would smell it and come wandering in. Then, bang."

"Dempsey, get Tom a beer. It'll give you something constructive to do with your hands," Longstreet said.

We all smiled, mostly at the ground, though, except Dempsey, who rose to draw Tom Folley a beer and took it to him.

"By the tire marks this guy has been using a three- or four-wheeler. Hard to tell which ATV. He drives out to some spot, sets up, fries bacon, shoots bear, takes gall bladder, then packs up and leaves. Vultures do the rest." Folley spoke be-

tween sips. "Shells lying around say he uses a .300 Savage."

"And you found these dead bears around here, close to Westline?" someone asked. I didn't see who. It sounded like Smitty talking through his heavy beard into his plastic cup.

"Not all of them. Atop Thundershower was one, Libby Run another; the mother and cubs were on the other side of the TV tower. But far as I can tell, all tracks lead back into Westline every time. Someone in this town's doing it."

I watched Longstreet's eyes make a low, slow, sweeping pass around the parts of Westline he could see: past the Westline Inn, the various houses, and the numerous hunting camps that made up most of this small, isolated, mountain hamlet. "So how's it concern us?" he asked. "You ain't answered that yet."

"In many ways it concerns you," Folley said slowly. "When I make out my report next week, Harrisburg's going to see what's going on, and you know what they're going to do?"

"Form committees, have meetings, spend a year and a half debating what to do about it?" Sarcasm dripped in Longstreet's voice thicker than pine pitch. There were three things in this world none of us had much use for, and they all started with the

letter p: poplar trees, porcupines, and politicians.

"No. There'll be no debate. What there will be is a slug of Game Commission men swarming all over this area, some under cover, most with search warrants, so many men, in fact, well, I'm just afraid it's going to cramp you guys' style."

"Us? You're worried about us?" Feldman, who only last year had lost his trapping license, his traps, and a couple of weeks' wages in fines because Folley found his traps set a bit too close to a beaver's home (almost up inside it, to be exact, and the Game Commission frowns on that), laughed into his empty beer glass. "You ain't worried about us," Feldman said. "You're worried about your ownself. All them hotshots out of Harrisburg up here and, hey, they may see how easy you really got it."

"That's partly true. Sure. I only got a few months till I retire, and I don't need something like this upsetting things. But that ain't all of it. For thirty years I've patrolled this entire area. Sometimes I caught you guys, sometimes I didn't. Sometimes it was someone else caught. But this thing here with these bears and someone killing them, not for meat or sport, or even for the challenge, but for money, and then leaving that sow and those

cubs lay to rot, that's, well, that's something I want to put an end to. I want to do it as kind of a last hurrah before I bow out, and I'm hoping you guys are going to want to help me. It'll save you buying me a retirement gift like I know you were going to.

"'Course; if you don't help, come hunting season this fall you guys better have every scrap of paper you're required to carry, all tags filled out correct, every piece of equipment with you the law requires. You better have every *i* crossed and *t* dotted, and your sheds and your freezers better be empty. Those boys out of Harrisburg, they're not going to be as gentle with you as I've been through the years. You guys need all that hassle?"

Folley was right about one thing. We could have had a lot worse law official after us. Folley wasn't a bad guy. It was just that he had his job to do, we had ours. In another reality we could all probably be good friends.

"What do you want us to do?" Longstreet asked. "Catch the guy for you?"

"Jesus, no. No. I'd be afraid of what you guys might do to him if you caught him."

"What'll you do to him? Fine him?"

"Fine him, take his license. Other government agencies could get involved depending on how widespread it—"

"Confiscate his grill," Feldman added, snickering. "Eat his bacon."

Folley ignored that. "All I want you guys to do is keep your ears and eyes open. Get ahold of me if you hear or see anything that might be related to this. I'm figuring it might be people in one of these camps here. That's all I want you to do." He looked at each one of us one at a time, and it was hard to tell if it was respect, caution, or fear I saw in his eyes. Probably all three.

"We'd punish him in a way you ain't thought of yet," Smitty told him pointblank and truthfully. "How about we cut *his* gall bladder out and feed it to other bears? What's a guy's gall bladder look like anyway?"

"That's exactly the kind of mountain law I don't need carried out around here," Tom Folley warned, the most serious he'd been since he pulled up. "Concern yourself with just your ears and your eyes. Then get ahold of me if you see or hear something."

Longstreet was shielding the sunlight from his eyes with his hand, looking up at the lush green mountain that formed the south border of Westline. "How many bears you say you've found?"

"Five so far."

"I'd guess six now," Longstreet said matter-of-factly.

We all looked in the direction Longstreet was looking. There above an area known as Black Snake, in the cloudless blue sky, soared a half dozen or more turkey vultures with four, maybe five, foot wingspans, gliding effortlessly in low circles on the warm air currents rising from the ground—currents that carried up the rancid scent of decayed flesh. Dinner to a vulture. More vultures could be seen coming in from the east. Whatever them scavengers smelled dead in the forest, whatever it was they were swooping in on, it was big, big enough to attract that many birds. Big as a dead bear, maybe.

Tom Folley swore out loud. "Six," he said. "Anymore, the damn vultures around here are eating better than I am."

THE INVESTIGATION

"Folley told us he didn't want us doing anything," Feldman said to Longstreet. "Just listen and watch."

"Well, he tells us not to shoot deer out of season, too, don't he? Why would we suddenly start listening to what Folley tells us to do?"

We were all sitting in a row at the bar of the Westline Inn drinking draft beers out of frosted pint canning jars, the way the inn serves its beers. I was nearest the window letting my gaze drift around outside; I settled on watching the jack of the inn's oil well bobbing up and down, pumping natural gas mostly, a bit of oil sometimes, too. I was forming a plan already because I could tell Longstreet was determined to take this bear killing thing a little further than Folley wanted us to. Men as crazy as Longstreet could be sometimes weren't known for planning and thinking things through. In part, that's what makes them do such crazy, almost mindless, things.

So I was formulating a plan, and at the same time I was half listening to Longstreet, Feldman, Smitty, and Dempsy talking, summing up what they had so far.

"There's seven camps in," Smitty reported. "They've all been around for at least two weeks."

"Any of them have three- or four-wheelers?" Longstreet asked.

"Five of them do."

"Who are they?"

Smitty ran his fingers through his beard. "Just driving around town I saw Camp Erie was in. There's someone I don't know, a

Mr. Donovan, in at that new A-frame down by the creek. Mrs. Simpson is in, and she's alone. Someone said her and her husband had had a big falling out and that she might be fixing to leave him. I wouldn't mind doing a little undercover work on her whenever she does finally leave her old man. The brother of the guy from Pittsburgh who owns camp Lucky Day, he's in. I don't know what his name is, though. He walks with a limp. And then, of course, Camp Kill Buck, they're always in. Same crew. A slug of them. They're putting a new roof on their camp. All those camps have three- or four-wheelers sitting outside."

For those who don't know, I should say right off, Westline was composed of maybe forty homes. Half these buildings were hunting and fishing camps owned by out-of-towners from Pittsburgh, Philly, Erie, and Ohio or New York State. Some camp owners popped in and out of their camps on a regular year-round basis; others showed up only during hunting and fishing seasons; some we hardly ever saw, so we really didn't know them all that well.

While most of the regular camp owners, those who'd been coming to Westline for a couple of decades, were respectable enough people, there were a few

we could just barely tolerate, a few so obnoxious only a blind man would be happy to see them. These were the guys who'd moved away from big city problems (crime, traffic, noise, congestion) and then for some reason, once they got themselves acquainted with our much slower, more back-to-basics lifestyle, right away wanted to change things—make Westline life more like the city life they'd just escaped from; wanting luxuries like city utilities on demand, paved roads, and the conveniences of things like McDonald's and 7-Elevens and a mall that would take up the whole town. Next thing you knew, they'd expect every house and camp to have inside toilets. So some folks we didn't have much time for; others could be like second family.

"Why are we even bothering with this?" Feldman asked. "This is Folley's work."

Longstreet stared straight ahead, not moving his head. "Because it's wrong. Killing them bears for that reason and leaving them lay that way is wrong. W-R-O-N-G. Besides, Folley'll never catch them, and we've got our Labor Day cook-out coming up. We always have venison for that, and how are we going to get ourselves any deer meat if half of Harrisburg is hiding behind the trees or

poking their heads in our freezers? So we've got to try; we've got to put this to rest now. Folley's right. It'll cramp our style."

Longstreet continued studying the line of bottles that made up the backbar. "Five camps with three- and four-wheelers, huh," he said mostly to himself. "It's got to be one of those five, then. Problem is, which camp is the poaching coming out of and how do we prove it?"

Slowly my plan was becoming clearer. But to understand it you have to understand a bit of the area's history.

This is oil and timber country. It's hunting country, gun country. But it was the timber industry that brought Westline into being way back in the 1800's.

The building that was now the Westline Inn was originally Edmund Day's house as well as offices for Day Chemical Company. Most of the houses and camps around Westline were old company homes that the Day Chemical Company sold to folks when it went out of business in the early 1900's.

What this Day Chemical Company did was log the forest and then make charcoal, acetic acid, resin, and every other by-product they could extract from those trees, even kindling, which was shipped to city folks. All that was left of the trees when the process was completed

was a thick gooey tar substance, a bit like the creosote you find all over the inside of your chimney if you haven't cleaned it in a while.

Yes, sir, folks back then made use of every inch of a tree, the same way we made use of every ounce of meat on any deer we killed. And that's what—pardon the pun—galled us about them black bears dead, most of the carcass left to rot. To us that was an unforgivable waste, a crime worse than any crime we ever committed.

Anyway, this tar the company was left with they buried in numerous big pits all over the area. On hot summer days you can still sometimes see it bubbling up out of the ground, like road tar does when it's really hot. If you knew where the tar pits were (and we all knew where most of them were), you simply stayed out of them, walked around them so you didn't track the stuff in through your house.

It wasn't too long ago, though, that the Environmental Protection Agency got wind of these tar pits buried in the ground, buried in the National Forest, possibly polluting folks' well water or gumming up nearby Kinzua Creek, which snakes right through Westline and the ANF, and before you knew it, a bunch of EPA buzzards swooped

in and were swarming all over the town, telling us we needed to be saved. They were here to save us, save us from something they called harmful. But we'd lived with that something harmful all our lives. It was only harmful if your old lady banged you over the head with a skillet when you tracked the gooey stuff in on her carpet.

One of them tar pits that the EPA decided just had to be cleaned up (and yes, we were on the EPA's Super Fund list, even though Love Canal is only a hundred miles north of us and seemed to need the cleanup worse than us) was right next to the inn, right where the inn's oil well now sat pumping.

In the end, only two good things come out of this invasion of government baboons: The inn discovered, when researching their deed, that they owned the mineral rights to the land they'd bought—a real rarity in this area to own mineral rights—thus the oil well, thus the inn fared well. Two, the EPA left, but left most of the tar pits still buried. They realized the size of their task, realized they couldn't possibly get rid of all the tar pits, but not before they dumped four million tax dollars into the ground. They saved face, rationalizing their failure by downgrading the danger of the tar, telling us they'd determined

that it wasn't as harmful as they'd thought, which is something everyone around here tried to tell them in the first place—the tar wasn't hurting nothing. Any wonder we didn't have much faith or trust in the federal government or the state government with razzle-dazzle performances like that?

I turned from watching the inn's well and told Longstreet and the others my plan. I told them I'd got it broke down to three easy steps; that I thought Feldman and Dempsey should take care of Step One—going around to them five camps selling lottery tickets to raise money for the local volunteer fire department of which we were all members. That would be a good cover.

Step Two we could all take part in because we'd need as many witnesses as possible.

And if we needed to go further, if we needed a backup plan, then Smitty could handle Step Three.

If my plan worked and we knew which of them people was poaching them bears, leaving the carcasses to feed the vultures, we could decide then if we wanted to punish them ourselves, hard, before we called Folley or let Folley handle it himself.

"I don't know how cops do

this," Feldman said, listing a bit to his left and slurring his words. We were standing on Longstreet's porch. Feldman's eyes were red, his cheeks flushed pink, and it wasn't from the heat either.

"Well, Jesus Christ," Dempsy said. "Usually cops investigating things don't have two or three beers with everyone they talk to. You put away most of a case, all total. Plus all the shots you did."

Feldman sat down weakly on the porch step. "Anything for law and order," he slurred, drunk. "A dirty rotten job." He sat there considering for a long moment and then added, "That Mrs. Simpson sure is a pretty thing. I wonder if she's a real blonde?"

"Probably uppity as hell, too," Longstreet said glancing behind him through the screen door, where we all heard Mary shoving things around, then jingling car keys.

Feldman and Dempsy had just returned from completing Step One, visiting each of the five camps on the pretense of raising money for the firehall. The other part of Step One was that they were to socialize with those camp owners, b.s. with them, tell them what had been going on in Westline lately, who was dating who, who'd had a baby, who'd died, tell them about the den of mother and three

cubs everyone had been watching in the rock ledges near the top of Webb's Run; how those four bears were in their den usually just about sunup. 'Course there weren't any bear up on Webb's Run, but that's where we needed to send them and it sounded good. If I were a bear, I'd live up on Webb's Run.

There was no finer b.s.er in all the county than Feldman. That was why I picked him for Step One. It's been said Feldman could coax a starving dog out of the inn's garbage dumpster. That's how persuasive he could be, how convincing.

"And all these people have ATV's outside their camps?" Longstreet asked.

It wasn't like Longstreet to ask a question already brought up and discussed, so I figured his mind was wandering, concerned about something else going on. I watched him cast an uncertain look (very unusual for a guy like Longstreet to be unsure about anything) into the house just as Mary was coming out.

"They all had three-wheelers or four-wheelers, yes," Dempsy said. "Just as you told us to do, we looked at them as close as we dared. Not enough we'd give ourselves away, though. And—"

Feldman interrupted Dempsy. "I'd eliminate Camp Kill Buck simply because there's too many

of them. If one of them was slipping away wasting the bears, someone in the camp would miss him. And he'd have to be freezing the gall bladders somewhere. Camp Erie is, well, Camp Erie. Those guys have been coming here for years, and I doubt it's one of them. The brother of the guy from Pittsburgh, Bob is his name, well, he's only got one leg. Lost one in Nam, he said. He's up here painting wildlife pictures. Good artist, too, he is. It's a funny feeling sitting there doing shots with a guy while his false leg with the boot on is leaning in the corner of his camp. Damn war."

"But even with his false leg he could still manage a three-wheeler up in the woods," Dempsey added.

"It's hard to tell about Mrs. Simpson." Feldman continued as if Dempsey had never spoke. Feldman had done Nam, too. Dempsey hadn't. "I couldn't take my eyes off her long enough to look around. She knew I was watching her, and she was loving it. But like Folley said, it could be a woman, as well as a man."

"Who's the Mr. Donovan, in the A-frame?" Smitty asked.

"Short fellow. Jet black hair and a class-A jerk," Feldman said without hesitation. "One of them fellows who's living proof

abortions should be legalized. While we're talking, he's whining 'cause the township won't tar and chip the dirt road down to his camp. Like he's the only one in the county who matters. He whined about the snakes, the bugs and spiders, and how the field mice got into his camp and made a nest in one of his boots. I mean, why'd he come here if he's not willing to put up with some spiders, snakes, and field mice? They're as much a part of the woods as the trees are. Then, on top of all his complaining about the taxes he pays and that he gets no services and everything else, he refused to buy a firehall lottery ticket—"

When Mary stepped out on the porch all dressed to kill, I swear to God even the August breeze paused to admire her. Never had I seen her dressed like she was. All I'd ever seen her wear were those tight jeans.

Her hair was fixed in such a way that cute little curls hung down her temples. She wore only a tad of makeup, a light touch of pink rouge on her cheeks, just enough to give her yellow hair some distance, and a touch of eye shadow or mascara or whatever it is women have in all them tubes and bottles scattered all over the bathroom sink.

But it was the dress she wore

that had everyone looking, mouths agape. Yellow to go with her hair, with a little blue bow on her waist, the dress was short enough that with just a slight wind we'd all be seeing a lot more than Longstreet would ever want us to see—not that we couldn't see plenty of fine leg already. But we didn't need no breeze because the dress material was thin, so thin that when she stood on the porch with the sunlight behind her, we could almost see right through it. And we knew if she bent down too far we'd be able to see right down the front, so low was the thing cut. I think us seeing all this was what made Longstreet stiffen.

His cheeks flushed red, and it wasn't from rouge or booze. His strong jaw muscles twitched nervously while the rest of us were enjoying the view, sucking up the sweet scent of Mary's perfume that suddenly filled the small porch area. I could almost feel Longstreet's jealousy simmering inside him hotter than a low bank of glowing embers burning in a woodstove.

With the car keys dangling in her fingers Mary walked over to her husband and tried to kiss him goodbye on the cheek. "I'll be back in an hour or so when I'm done, then—"

But Longstreet drew his face away so he couldn't be kissed.

"Don't be like that," she said.

"Don't wear that dress."

"Don't tell me how to dress."

"See. Told you. Getting a bit uppity already."

"Well, I think you look nice,"

Dempsey said, either not thinking clearly or just plain ignorant of what was going on in front of him, a fight between a man and his wife, a personal thing between the two.

"Shut up, Dempsey." Longstreet spun around and brought all guns to bear on Dempsey like he was the cause of everything, which of course he wasn't. "Just shut your mouth before I shut it for you."

Longstreet was never one to pull punches.

Mary was in the car and had backed out the drive before any more was said. The rest of us stood there for a long, long moment, none of us knowing what to say, none of us wanting Longstreet turning on us.

Finally Longstreet spoke, stabbing his finger sharply at the porch floor. "Step Two. We meet here tonight. Four thirty A.M.," and he disappeared into his house letting the screen door slam, leaving the rest of us standing out there. As we dispersed and headed for our own homes, I had no problem hearing Longstreet's stereo turned up so loud he probably couldn't hear himself think, which I fig-

ured was the reason he had the volume up so high—so he *wouldn't* have to think. Just seethe at whatever it was Mary and him were having a go at.

At four thirty in the morning the mountain fog lay so thick I thought I could scoop some of it out with a spoon. On nights when there's no moon or there's heavy cloud cover, it can get so dark in the woods a guy can hardly see his own hand inches from his face. Luckily we had the light of a full moon to help us as we trekked up the steep mountain so that we'd come in from the backside of Webb's Run, near the rock ledges.

Purposely Longstreet and I lagged behind the others. Longstreet took the steep hill with little effort, hardly breaking out in a sweat. Of course, he was a logger by trade and was accustomed to climbing up and down grades steeper than the one we were on, carrying heavier loads with him than the .44 Mag he now had holstered on his hip. But what always surprised me about being in the woods with Longstreet was the deftness and ease of his every step. Like a deer he moved through the thick stands of cherry trees, seeming as weightless as the wind, making almost no noise, no rustling of leaves, no twigs snapping, no heavy panting. Very sure of him-

self he was, in this environment. Me? Almost everything I stepped on broke with a loud snap, and nearing the top, I had to pause to catch my breath. I leaned against a dead cherry tree.

While I peeled a thick scale of bark off the tree trunk, I thought it might not be a bad time to approach Longstreet privately about Mary and him, hoping I could help resolve whatever was going on between those two. Up ahead, Feldman, Smitty, and Dempsy had just broken over the final ridge of the hill and would be waiting for us at the top.

"She wants to get a job," he said when I asked him point-blank what the problem was. "She was going for an interview yesterday. Even after I told her I didn't like the idea."

Longstreet trusted me. We'd been friends since longer than we could remember—growing up together, going to school together, getting in trouble together. We'd been best man at each other's weddings. He and Mary often came over to my place late at night after my kids were in bed (Longstreet and Mary couldn't have kids), and me and my wife and Mary and Longstreet would sit out on our deck playing cards and drinking brews until near sunup.

"Is that all? She wants to go

to work?" I regretted wording it the way I did the moment I said it.

"What do you mean, 'is that all'? That's enough."

Longstreet prided himself on one fact—that he was the provider for Mary and him. As man, as husband, it was his responsibility in their marriage to provide shelter and food. To protect what was his, those he loved. And there was no doubt Longstreet and Mary loved each other.

Mary was quite a few—almost ten—years younger than Longstreet. But like a clump of yellow spring flowers sprouting up alongside the creek, she was growing fast and getting prettier and prettier each time I saw her. The way I had it figured, her wanting to get a job was just a continuation of her growth. She was always one to keep busy, always working at something or other.

"Let her," I said. "Think of it as getting a five or six dollar an hour raise."

"Yeah, right," he said sarcastically. "What does she think, I can't do it? I can't give her what she wants? Next thing you know, the house will start looking a mess; she'll start staying out later and later after work with God-knows-who slobbering down her blouse. Getting uppity as hell, too."

Longstreet's jealous streak was another stumbling point. In a lot of ways he was younger than Mary.

What they had was a communication problem. I knew why Mary wanted to go to work, and it had nothing to do with Longstreet's not being able to provide. Mary's working had to do with her self-worth as a person. It had to do with her contributing something more than just dusting furniture and doing dishes and making beds. It had a lot to do with eliminating boredom, sitting around the house all day trying to find things to do. It also had a lot to do with her loving Longstreet.

I wasn't sure if Mary had ever communicated that to Longstreet, though; anyway, Longstreet was getting the wrong message. She wanted a job for a positive reason, he was seeing it as something negative, something threatening. And the more he felt threatened, the harder he'd fight it. I knew too well what could happen next. Longstreet would jerk Mary back home. She'd resent it; a wall would grow between them. They'd live in the same house, but on opposite sides of that wall, building the wall higher and higher every day, lobbing little resentful remarks at each other over that wall. Where there once was love and good

times, there now would be fights and arguments:

I crumbled the dead bark in my fingers, pushed off from the tree, and headed up the hill where the others were. I found myself grappling with a way to explain to Longstreet what was going on between Mary and him. He wouldn't understand terms like self-worth or personal growth. I had to find a way to clarify things in words an old woodsman like Longstreet would understand.

Because we were at the top of the hill, near the rock ledges, we could see the sun rising sooner than folks down in the valley, down in Westline, could. We fanned out, covering both sides of the old weedy logging road that ran up Webb's Run from the front. If our bear poacher took the bait, believing Feldman about bears on Webb's Run, and the poacher showed in his ATV, he would have to use that road.

Hidden behind sizable trees, we waited and watched. Longstreet had about the best set of woods eyes a man ever had. He could see a flea move on the back of a squirrel even through the fog and the dense stand of cherry trees we were hiding in.

We waited. We watched. Noiselessly, motionlessly. I began cooling off after my climb, and a shiver ran down my back. In the immense silence of the

woods I heard a leaf hit the ground with a gentle *tick* a few yards in front of me. A bird chirped.

Then I heard something else. We all heard it.

The distant, low purring of an ATV, a three-wheeler or four-wheeler, approaching, climbing the mountain road. Then a flash of headlight as it turned up the hairpin switchback and headed right for us. We melted back into the forest, each pressed hard against a tree. All we wanted to do was to see who it was.

A figure appeared in the dim, foggy light, but it was still too far away for us to get a good look-see. Longstreet's eyes zeroed right in on the form. We all zeroed in, squinting to see better.

We probably all saw it at the same time. A rifle strapped across the driver's back; headlight bobbing because of the uneven ground. Yellow hair. A head full of yellow hair it looked like to me, though the distance was still too great, the light too dim, and the fog too thick to pick out facial features.

The ATV was coming into sight, into clearer view.

We stood so still, you'd have thought we'd grown there.

Closer. The driver with a head full of yellow hair was searching left and right, searching for the bears' den.

And then, like a cannon's roar rolling down the valley in volumes, Dempsey sneezed, *achoooooooooooo*. Folks down in Cameron County forty miles away probably heard it.

The headlight on the ATV stopped bobbing suddenly, and we could only watch as the machine was steered around. Just like that, with a loud gun of its engine, it raced back down the mountain away from us as fast as the bumpy mountain road would allow the driver to go.

We all looked over at Dempsey, disgusted. If scornful gazes were bullets, Dempsey would have been full of holes. He gave the ground a little kick and avoided looking at us.

Longstreet stepped out from behind his tree. "Step Three?" he said to me.

"Got to be," I said.

None of us spoke to Dempsey the entire walk back. I imagine most of us were thinking about the head full of yellow hair we saw; thinking about that and about Smitty doing Step Three and what we'd do to the person after Smitty confirmed for us who it was exactly. And I think we were all thinking about that pretty Mrs. Simpson from Philly who owned half her husband's import/export business. Maybe that's what their falling out had been all about. Maybe she wanted to dabble in illegal exports,

and her husband was a strict legal eagle.

I think Longstreet was the only one thinking about Mary.

MOUNTAIN LAW: MOUNTAIN JUSTICE

To us, justice without punishment was no justice at all; it was a dog without its bark or bite.

"How are we going to get Folley into the camp? He needs a warrant, doesn't he?" Smitty asked.

Both Longstreet and I shook our heads—we weren't sure whether Folley needed a warrant or not.

"If he does, to get one I think he'd have to have probable cause. What we know probably isn't probable enough for their way of thinking. Some hotshot lawyer would get the whole thing thrown out," Smitty said.

"We'll find some way to get him in there on the up and up," Longstreet told him.

Smitty had just returned from completing Step Three. He was to go around to those five camps with ATVs, pretending he'd just torn apart his own three-wheeler or four-wheeler, depending on which camp owned what, and that he needed to look at their back tire assembly up close

'cause he was having trouble fixing his and needed to see another one to see how it went.

"It's scumball lawyers who've made it so hard for guys like Folley to do their job." Smitty, wagging his head back and forth sorrowfully, wasn't feigning disgruntlement at the present day justice system. But he *was* chuckling to himself at the irony of his remark.

For us and for justice, things were largely black and white, right and wrong. We had no gray areas that lawyers could expand and manipulate and dawdle in. Lawyers like those who'd want to try to convince people that their client, a mass murderer, really had the heart of Mother Teresa wouldn't last long in Westline. And we'd become fed up with painting people like our poacher as victims. (*"So you see, Your Honor, my client was abused by teddy bears as a child. That's what made him do it. My client suffers from what psychologists, specialists in their field, call Delayed Teddy Bear Abuse Syndrome. Growing up, my client just had too many teddy bears. Killing them black bears was just a way my client could finally lash out."*)

No. We had no time for any of that.

Our poacher was guilty. We knew who it was, and we had the culprit cold. As far as we

were concerned, the only questions facing us, as me, Longstreet, and Smitty stood outside near Longstreet's house, were what we were going to do about it. What was proper measure? And when did we call Folley in?

"What next, then?" Smitty asked Longstreet.

Longstreet smiled to himself like he was enjoying a private joke, and I just knew what he was thinking was wicked. "I know what's next," he said finally, his smile widening. "Tell Feldman and Dempsey we'll all meet halfway down the road to the camp tonight at midnight."

Something hung in Longstreet's voice that reminded me of the time we'd caught a kid, a camp owner's son, stealing gas from cars: from our cars, out of our sheds, even out of cars of dinner customers parked in the inn's parking lot.

All the footprints and tire tracks had led to the camp where this young man had been staying while working in the area. We called the state police, who sent a trooper to talk with the kid. The trooper told us that although he felt the kid actually did steal the gas he, the trooper, was unable to do anything about it. Why don't you guys take care of it in-house, the trooper said to Longstreet and me, winking.

So Longstreet did. He got an

old gas can, filled it with three gallons of gas, dumped in five pounds of sugar, and mixed it good until the sugar was dissolved. We placed the can alongside the macadam road leading out of Westline just before our gas-stealing buddy would be driving to work and tilted it so it looked like it might have bounced off the back of someone's truck. And then we positioned ourselves not far away, out of sight, to make sure the wrong person didn't pick up the tainted gas.

Along came our friend. Brake lights flashed as he passed the can lying alongside the road. He backed up, got out. He opened the can, smelled the contents, and, satisfied it wasn't kerosene, dumped the gas into his tank, probably thinking what a lucky day this was starting out to be for him.

The next time we saw him he was walking.

So I was feeling a little uncomfortable when I heard Longstreet tell Smitty, "I have a little job for Dempsy, so make sure he comes tonight."

There was something devious in his voice, and whatever it was he was scheming to do, I had the feeling Longstreet was going to put Dempsy to some kind of awful test.

*

Longstreet handed Dempsy a small paper bag.

In the moonlight, paled by a veil of lingerie-thin clouds, I watched Dempsy squirm uneasily as he peered into the bag.

"It's a hundred yards from the inn's garbage dumpster to Donovan's camp," Longstreet told him. "You got ten of Pennsylvania's finest in that bag. That'll allow you one for every ten yards. Don't go eating any. Use them up too quickly and you could be in trouble."

"Ahhhhh, Longstreet," Dempsy whined, clearly nervous. "Why's it me that has to do it? How do you know it's a hundred yards? Did you measure it? You got the wrong camp anyway."

"It's the right camp. And you've earned the right to do it, Dempsy," Longstreet said. "Yes, sir, you've earned the right all around. 'Course, if you're chicken, one of us will do it." Longstreet knew how to push the right buttons.

He continued, "And no, I didn't measure it. It just looks to be a hundred yards. Could be less. Maybe more. Now, get going 'cause there's three in the dumpster right now. Get me a big one." Longstreet pushed a reluctant Dempsy in the direction of the Westline Inn's garbage dumpster where we'd all just seen three black bears dragging out bags of restaurant scraps,

scrounging through the garbage for food, spreading garbage all over the place. Bears in the dumpster were a common sight, and they were accustomed to having people standing near them, watching them.

The funny thing was, near the dumpster those bears were safer from guys like Donovan than they would be out in the woods. The dumpster was right near the middle of town. Not even Donovan was that stupid—shooting a bear right in the middle of town. Now, you have to understand the black bear is not normally considered ferocious. No one could remember anyone's ever being mauled by one. In fact, it's rather a timid animal in spite of being the biggest thing in the forest, although a goodsized one could rip a dog apart with one sweep of its paw if the dog cornered it. And you were taking your own chances if you got between a mother bear and her cubs. But basically bears were more a nuisance than a threat, spreading garbage all over your porch, all over your yard, waking all the dogs in town and getting them barking all night long.

And bears were a curiosity for the many tourists visiting the area. It wasn't uncommon to spy a mother bear down by the creek trying to teach two inattentive cubs playing in the creekbed

how to fish by swatting fish out of the water. Or a mother bear crossing the highway reaching over and giving a cub a healthy smack along its bottom to hurry it up across the roadway.

But if you had to sum it all up, black bears seem more interested in eating than in anything else. And they are particularly fond of sweet things.

Longstreet asked Smitty after Dempsey was gone, "You bring what you were supposed to bring?"

Smitty tapped his pocket. "Got it here. Heated it on the stove a bit so it'll flow easier."

"Let's go, then." Longstreet turned down the road towards Donovan's camp. "We want to be ready whenever Dempsey gets back."

Donovan's A-frame was dark inside, made darker because it was set back among some pines. His truck was parked outside with his rifle in the gun rack in the cab. The camp had a front and a back door with windows front and back, heavily bolted wooden shutters that Donovan could close during the months he didn't use the camp. There were no side windows because the roof of the A-frame was the sides of the camp.

The only window we wouldn't be able to close was a small port-hole window up in the loft area where Donovan was sleeping.

But that window wasn't large enough for a guy to get even his head through, much less his body.

Parked nearby under a hemlock sat Donovan's ATV, and right next to it was the incriminating gas can and rag Smitty had seen Donovan using.

Longstreet whispered instructions to us as we stood just outside the camp. "You and Feldman," he said to me, "get around back. Slip a bolt into the door hasp so Donovan can't open it from inside. Quietly close the shutters and bolt them, too. We don't want him jumping out the window if for some reason he should make it downstairs, which I doubt he will. Smitty and I will take care of the front."

We all spun around, our attention caught by movement coming down the dirt road from the inn's dumpster.

In the moonlight we watched Dempsy crouched low fiddling nervously with his hands, reaching into the bag and unwrapping the next Hershey bar and setting it on the ground. Quickly he stepped back and looked in our direction as if to reassure himself he had enough candy bars left to make it to where we were standing; then he crouched low again and unwrapped another.

Immediately behind Dempsy from around the corner came a

large dark shadow three times Dempsy's size.

"Ooooo, weeee," Longstreet whispered. "If good old Mr. Donovan thinks them field mice are a problem, wait until he sees what damage this critter can do."

The bear's head was about the size of a bushel basket, and it looked like it weighed four hundred pounds. We could see summer fat rippling along the entire length of its body under coarse, shiny black hair. The bear fearlessly advanced to the next candy bar Dempsy had laid out for it. Its mouth was partly open, showing us yellow teeth and puffs of frosted air coming out of its snout as it walked (pigeon-toed they are, on account of their great weight and muscular shoulders and because their front legs are shorter than their hind legs), sometimes trotted, from candy bar to candy bar until Dempsy led it right to the edge of Donovan's porch. He used the very last candy bar to get it there.

Feldman and I had already taken care of locking the back area and were standing at a safe distance from the front porch so as not to spook our guest. We watched Smitty pull a bottle of warmed honey from his pocket.

He poured a good portion of it on the porch near the front door. The bear was just finishing the

last Hershey bar when it suddenly caught scent of the honey, natural food to a bear, and lumbered up onto the porch. The wooden porch floor sagged and creaked under its weight.

Longstreet reached over and pushed the unlocked front door open halfway. Both he and Smitty worked noiselessly, quickly, and efficiently, no moves wasted, like they'd done this all their lives.

The bear rolled its thick coarse tongue all over the porch floor, lapping honey, while Smitty quietly rolled the bottle with what honey was left in it across Donovan's living room floor. The bear, more interested in the honey than in Smitty and Longstreet, neared the doorway, following the sweet, gooey trail leading inside.

Lapping as it went, first the bear's head disappeared into the camp, then its shoulders, then the rest of its body, until finally the bear's large butt with its little stubby tail vanished and the brute was standing right in Donovan's living room, looking around.

Longstreet reached in and closed the door. Smitty jammed a bolt into the hasp so the door couldn't be opened. Each took a window, closed the front shutters, and bolted them.

Then we all stepped back a ways, waiting.

We heard a crash, a grunt, a snort as the bear, partly out of panic and partly in search of food, began busting up the interior of the camp. (Later we learned the bear found twenty pounds of Donovan's uncooked bacon when it knocked over the small refrigerator, and it must have worked up an appetite ransacking the place because it ate all twenty pounds.)

A light suddenly came on in the porthole window.

We heard a low growl, another snort, more crashing of things getting tossed around.

Then a loud, "Hey. What the—? Heeeeeeeey! What are you doing in here? Get out of here. Don't you come up here now. *Don't* come up here. *Helllllllll! Police!*" Then, as if he'd remembered there was no Westline police department except maybe for us, Donovan yelled, "*Fire Department—!*"

We strolled towards the inn letting Donovan scream his fool head off. Above his screaming we could still hear an ungodly crashing going on inside the camp.

"Poetic justice," someone commented.

"What's them poets got to do with this?" Longstreet said, checking his watch. "The inn's still open. We got time to stop in and have a few. Alibi our-

selves," he said. "This police work sure is thirsty business."

"Easy, too," Feldman added. "Especially when you haven't got things like lawyers, dumb laws, and bleeding hearts getting in your way."

Until we gave him the bag of candy bars, none of us had seen Dempsy all that day since the sneezing incident, so embarrassed was he about that. So Dempsy hadn't been privy to what we'd discovered, and I could see he was puzzled about it. I wasn't too surprised then when I heard him ask Longstreet, "How do you know Donovan's the one been poaching the bears? What about the yellow blonde hair we saw? Donovan's hair is as black as that bear's."

"That wasn't yellow hair," Longstreet told him. "That was a yellow helmet he was wearing. Smitty saw it fastened to the handlebars of his ATV when he was checking Donovan's machine out. And how do we know? Tell him, Smitty."

We all stopped outside the small porch of the Westline Inn.

Smitty pushed his baseball cap back to the peak of his head. "As I went around checking people's ATV's pretending I was trying to get mine put back together, I was really checking to see if any of those machines had tar on them, fresh tar. Mrs. Simpson's machine was not only

clean, it hadn't been moved in a few days. Grass was starting to grow up in the spokes even. So we knew it wasn't her who'd rode up Webb's Run, and I was glad to see that. Everyone else's machine was clean, too, except for our buddy Mr. Donovan. And there he was, with gas can and rag, cleaning the tar off; tar so fresh some of it was still dripping. And boy was he whining and complaining about it, let me tell you. The rifle on the gun rack in his truck is a .300 Savage, complete with shoulder strap."

"And he picked the tar up on—" Dempsy started to add.

"In that tar pit that stretches across the entire width of the road up Webb's Run," I finished for him. "One of them tar pits the EPA failed to remove."

Dempsy nodded that he understood the rest, so I didn't need to explain to him that that's why we told everyone them bears were denning up Webb's Run. And that's why we had Dempsy and Feldman checking everyone's machines the first time. All the machines were clean then. No way could anyone drive an ATV up that road and back down it without driving through that tar pit, getting tar all over their machine, gooing it all up. The tar was the clincher as far as we were concerned.

"You guys are terrible," Dempsey kidded.

"And, Dempsey," Longstreet told him, "you done good to-night."

Dempsey smiled like his lost soul had just been reclaimed by the Lord.

"When are you going to call Folley?" Smitty asked.

Longstreet rubbed his chin, considering. "The way I figure, we'll let the bear do Folley's searching. That bear don't need no warrant. If them gall bladders are in that camp, that bear will find them. They'll be frozen, so he won't eat them. But what we've done is give Folley good reason to go in there. He's a wildlife conservation officer, isn't he? His job is to protect wildlife from people, or in this case, people from wildlife. But let's not call him until morning. It'll give Donovan time to think and maybe find a little remorse in his heart. Maybe he and that bear will reach a quiet understanding. Folley can bring his tranquilizing gun then."

"He'll tranquilize the bear?" Dempsey asked. "I'd like to see that."

"No. Oh no," Longstreet said. "For the bear he'll simply open the doors and it'll just run out, glad to be out of there. It probably won't stop running until it hits Warren County. No. Actually I was thinking more Folley

might need to tranquilize Donovan."

EPILOGUE

On Sundays the Westline Inn opens at noon. The owner/chef was in the kitchen preparing the dinner specials for the day; the waitresses were bustling about getting the tables set up; the bartender was running loads of pint canning jars through the dishwasher in the kitchen. That left just me and Longstreet sitting at the bar finishing our burgers and fries. In an hour or so the place would begin to fill up.

Longstreet rubbed the bar top with his hand. "I'll buy your lunch," he informed me.

"Well, thanks. What's that for?"

"For what you told me yesterday about me and Mary and her working."

"That's just the way I saw it," I said.

I'd read one time that a friend is someone you can think out loud in front of and not feel ashamed. Longstreet was thinking out loud to me now, his voice softened, the usual brashness gone.

"She got the job, you know. Zippo's opening a small museum in Bradford. Displaying old

lighters and things like that. Retail shop, too. They need someone personable, goodlooking, and smart, I guess, to help run it. It's only twenty or thirty hours a week."

"She's well qualified for it then," I said truthfully. "I hope she likes the job. Zippo's good to work for. They're good people."

"Yeah, she's got what it takes all right. Anyway, I agreed to try it. You know, Zippo's going to give her full benefits, too. We need them, especially the health bennies."

As a self-employed, independent logger, the most dangerous occupation there is, Longstreet paid through the nose for insurance for him and Mary. Now he could drop all that and use hers, and save himself quite a few bucks, plus her salary. I could almost see him mentally loading up the pros and cons of Mary's working, balancing things so they sat even with him.

"And she promised not to dress, well, so revealing," he said.

"You got the right to expect that."

I smeared my last french fry in the ketchup, popped it in my mouth, and thought about what I'd told Longstreet. I'd told him to think of his marriage as something alive growing between them, something like them black bears. And that his preventing Mary from doing a little outside

work was no different from Donovan killing them bears for a small thing like a gall bladder. Just as selfish, too. You're just going to kill and waste a perfectly good marriage, Longstreet, I told him. All over a simple little thing like her wanting to work, you not wanting her to, and neither of you being able to sit down and communicate what it is you want and what you're expecting. You want to kill and waste your marriage over something that small, go ahead, knock yourself out. You'll have no one else to blame but yourself.

To get a point across to guys like Longstreet, you sometimes have to be as blunt with them as they are with others.

Apparently it had worked. I'd just eaten for free, hadn't I?

Tom Folley pushed open the inn's door and came over to us. "I want to thank you for the call this morning," he said.

Folley had been over to Donovan's camp for several hours, going through it. We'd watched him put Donovan's rifle into his game commission truck, probably to match bullets. Later we watched a Pennsylvania state police car drive down the road, and then it left again with Donovan sitting in the back seat, scowling out the window at us, scowling at the world.

"All I heard was a bunch of noise coming from there. Sound-

ed like a bear in trouble. What'd you find?" Longstreet asked.

"You're not going to believe this, but it seems our Mr. Donovan is not only our bear killer, he's just a tip of an iceberg in a international gang of poachers bringing in illegal shipments of hides smuggled through Canada, full-mounted game, mostly endangered species like polar bears, and even illegal ivory from elephants. Big cats. You name it. The gall bladders cut out of bears from here to Canada is just one small part of their operation. It seems if it had anything to do with animals and poaching Donovan and his buddies were involved in it. What a lucky find for me."

Folley smiled and continued, "You get that bear out of here," he screamed when I got there. 'I'll tell you anything about what's going on. I never wanted to be in this anyway. I'll tell you names, places, dates, warehouse locations. Just get that overgrown fuzball out of my camp.' And right there in the middle of the floor, big and hard as a softball, was what looked like a dozen gall bladders frozen in a clump. You know a bear's gall bladder is only about the size of a man's thumb. Donovan's talking with the state police now. We'll know more later."

"Don't say we never gave you a retirement gift," Longstreet told him.

"The camp was all busted up, and Donovan was hunkered behind a barricade of beds, dressers, and mattresses he'd made. What I can't figure out is how them doors and shutters got locked." Folley scratched his head, but he didn't look at us. "Any ideas?"

"Probably the wind," I said. "Blowing up the creek like it does, it gets to swirling bad. It'll do funny things sometimes."

"Probably," Folley agreed. "Probably best I just write it up that way. And I won't mention all them Hershey bar wrappers I found strung along the road either." Now he was looking at us. "Probably that same swirling wind doing them same funny things, huh? I just picked them up and threw them in the dumpster for you." He stared straight ahead again.

"Well, thanks for cleaning our town," Longstreet said. He turned to me. "I've got to get going. I told Mary I'd bring her over here for dinner tonight, as kind of a celebration for her getting the job. I got a couple of things I've got to do first. Where's Dempsy, Smitty, and Feldman?"

"I don't know where Dempsy is," I said. "Smitty's cutting Mrs. Simpson's yard. Feldman's painting her camp."

Longstreet and Folley walked

out of the inn together. "This is a switch, me behind you," Longstreet said pointing at Folley's fat rear end, laughing behind Folley's back. "That's why you've never caught me, Tom," Longstreet told him. "Lordy, what heft. Lighten that load a little, and you might be able to run faster. You're big as a bear back there."

"Shut up, Longstreet," Tom Folley said. "Just shut up."

*

As for me? I was thinking I'd get two six-packs, pull up a lawn chair, and supervise the work at Mrs. Simpson's camp awhile. Then all of us could sit there and watch the paint dry.

All seemed right with the world suddenly; there was peace in the valley again, and when it's like that, a guy hardly feels like doing anything that might upset that feeling.

SOLUTION TO THE AUGUST "UNSOLVED":

Dave is the diamond thief. His last name is, oddly enough, Jules. He was the last in line, trying to be inconspicuous.

POSITION	NAME	BIRTHDAY	AGE	STATE	LUGGAGE
1	Carl Hanks	April	24	Wyoming	maroon
2	Elmo Grant	January	22	Vermont	brown
3	Andy Kline	September	26	Utah	tan
4	Fred Irish	February	27	S. Carolina	blue
5	Bert Lamar	June	23	Texas	gray
6	Dave Jules	May	28	Tennessee	black

UNSOLVED

by
Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the October issue.

The three-way feud out there in Red Valley had been going on for generations. The current participants themselves didn't know exactly when or where it started. It was just a way of life—and death. Surviving and still carrying out the tradition were old Mr. Ruddle, his son, and their two wives, who hated all Sipples and Tuttles; old Mr. Sipple, his son, and their two wives, who despised all Ruddles and Tuttles; and old Mr. Tuttle, his son, and their two wives, who detested all the Ruddles and Sipples. Each household kept a weapon handy at all times, and every wife was chosen for her marksmanship rather than her looks. As an inevitable result, the Ruddles, Sipples, and Tuttles were a downright ugly set of individuals.

Their nervous neighbors in Red Valley were greatly relieved, therefore, when the six cantankerous, trouble-seeking, short-tempered couples decided to move to Crimson City. Imagine their surprise to learn that the warring clans had made a temporary truce and that all had moved into the six story Scarlett Apartment House, with one couple on each floor.

One night soon thereafter, the peace ended abruptly (and most people said predictably). Occupants of nearby dwellings and passersby declared it sounded like “a shooting gallery,” “the Fourth of July,” and “all hell breaking loose.” In the fracas one of the residents of the Scarlett apartments killed another.

(1) No husband and wife have the same initial, so Andy is not married to Alice, Bart to Bessy, and so on. Two couples have pistols, two have shotguns, and two have rifles. No father and son occupy adjacent floors or own the same weapon.

(2) Old Mr. Tuttle lives just below Elmer and just above Flora. None of the three has a shotgun.

(3) The old man with the shotgun lives just below Andy and just above old Mr. Ruddle. None of the three is married to Edith.

(4) Bart, who is not married to Doris, lives just below Clara and just above young Mr. Tuttle. None of the three owns a rifle.

(5) If the couple on the top floor is *old*: the killer was on the floor immediately above the victim; the victim did not own a pistol; and Fred's last name is not Sipple and he does not live on the third floor.

However, if the couple on the top floor is *young*: the killer was on the floor immediately below the victim; the victim owned a pistol; and Fred's last name is Sipple and he lives on the third floor.

(6) If Alice's last name is *Ruddle*: Dick lives on the first floor and owns a pistol; and Edith does not live on the fifth floor and her husband does not own a rifle.

But if Alice's last name is *not Ruddle*: Dick is not on the first floor and does not have a pistol; and Edith and her rifle-wielding husband are the fifth floor couple.

(7) If Andy's last name is *Ruddle*: the killer was a woman who lived just below her victim; Clem's last name is not Ruddle and he is not married to Doris; Bessy's husband was not killed; and killer and victim are of opposite sexes.

If Andy's last name is *Sipple*: the killer did not live immediately below the victim; Clem's wife is Doris; Bessy's husband was killed; and killer and victim are the same sex.

If Andy's last name is *Tuttle*: the killer lived just above the victim; Clem's last name is Ruddle; Bessy was killed; and killer and victim are the same sex.

(8) Clara was neither the victim nor the killer.

Who shot whom that night? With what?

See page 95 for the solution to the August puzzle.

FICTION

THE MARY SHELLEY MYSTERY

Michelle Knowlden



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 9/96

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Diphtheria spiraled through my immune system and left me prostrate on the morning room sofa. I was almost too weak to convey my cook's sweetcakes and cheeses to my lips.

Aside from my being stricken with an acutely contagious disease with the potential for heart failure, life was good. I'd finished the Davencourt case two weeks ago. Aunt Helena was unaware of this, as I'd talked my client into sending her final payment in installments. Whenever Aunt Helena called, I'd groan about the circumstances of the case, mention the inherent difficulties in tracking down missing husbands, and lament the ravages of my ailment. Keeping my aunt satisfied that I fulfilled the conditions of my uncle's trust with full-time employment was a career in itself.

Of course, Aunt Helena and Selma Davencourt were the only ones in Wildemark, Wisconsin, who didn't know where Horace Davencourt escaped to for three weeks every May. It had taken me a short afternoon to drive out to Mesquite Creek and Horace's favorite fishing hole to warn him about Selma's histrionics. I wondered what story he'd concoct next year. Fishing was worse than another woman in Selma's eyes.

The only mystery I had to cope

with at the moment was Gary LaMare's strange behavior in the office. He'd disappear for long hours, was sullen and brusque with the workers and with me, his partner. My cousin, Robyn Cardex, had pointed out that the tension level in the office had been high for weeks now. In the depths of diphtheria I had scarcely noticed.

Robyn was in and out of the office a lot herself these days. Also a recipient of dividends from Uncle's trust, she suffered from good health and an uncompromising work ethic. Not Cardex traits I share. She actually enjoyed the cases we worked on together and the infrequent cases she shouldered alone in the literary investigations department of LaMare and Cardex. She was also a long-standing student at the university, working diligently on her doctoral thesis on vowel harmonics in Victorian novels. Since April she'd deviated from her research to assist her thesis advisor in tracking down the origin of a one-hundred-seventy-seven-year-old manuscript donated to the university.

Perhaps that was the source of Gary's sour demeanor, I mused. I debated between sponge cake soaked in rum and a smoked salmon tartlet while sipping tea I'd brought from England last summer. Perhaps

he was peeved that she performed this task pro bono rather than under the agency's accounting auspices. I rubbed my neck and wondered if lesions were multiplying down my throat.

"Phone's for you," Connie said, shoving the instrument at me. She removed the half finished tray while I wiggled the receiver into a comfortable position between couch cushion and ear. At my feeble protest, she said something about dinner in an hour and spoiled appetites. I didn't understand her point.

"Yes?" I quavered into the phone.

"Micky? Thank God I got you. Aunt Helena's disappeared."

A seismic shock wouldn't have startled me more. Aunt Helena's comings and goings received more forewarnings than a space shuttle launch. If spoiled appetites weren't in my vocabulary, disappearances certainly weren't in hers.

"What?" I said.

"Are you awake?" Robyn asked. "I said she's gone and no one knows where. Her butler called me a few minutes ago, absolutely frantic. Said she'd gone to dinner with friends last night and never came home. I called the Carlises, who said she'd left at ten."

This appeared to call for a sitting position. I struggled to it,

carefully balancing the cooling teacup in my hands, and marshaled my thoughts.

"Has anyone called the police?"

"You *are* still asleep. You know the police won't take a report till the person's been missing three days."

"No," I said patiently. "But they can check to see if she's been arrested. Not an unexpected proposition, knowing Aunt Helena. Since she's as predictable as winter chinooks and almost as deadly, you'd think the police would want advance notice of her vanishing. Also, she's a wealthy woman, and we must think of the possibility of ransom. I assume there've been no demands?"

"No, but there is something else," Robyn murmured. "I can't talk about it over the phone. I'll be at your place in ten minutes."

"Okay," I said, puzzled. "One thing—I assume Gregory's with her?"

"Of course," she said and hung up.

Of course, I thought. Gregory was Aunt Helena's secretary, unpublished-poet protégé, and shadow. It was incomprehensible to imagine one without the other. Somehow knowing that Gregory was with Aunt Helena made me feel both better and worse.

*

After warning Connie about the prospect of dinner guests, I passed through the kitchen with its smells of garlic and sage wafting above the stove and headed for the stairs. Even I had to admit that pajamas weren't the best attire for detective work.

Before I got there my front door shook with a thunderous knocking. Too soon for Robyn; I hoped this interruption wouldn't take long. It was a haggard Gary at the door.

"Must talk." He brushed past me and entered my study.

I hung on the door for a moment. My house in the hills above Wildemark was an unremarkable two story. I mainly rattled around the half-dozen rooms upstairs while Connie did the same downstairs. The door was the only thing that distinguished it from the other houses in the cul-de-sac. It came from a third century church in Morocco that had been torn down a hundred years ago. I had found it propped against a wall in the back of a rug shop in Istanbul. It was made from heavy timbers more than a foot thick and was bound with iron plates and hinges. I'd had my door frame enlarged to harbor this dark monstrosity. An old Armenian artisan in Madison had created murals above the door both in-

side and out. The sandstone figures outside vibrated with leaping porpoises and weaving humming birds and dragonflies. The terra cotta one inside depicted limpid swans beneath drooping willow trees.

I closed the door. Inside my den, Gary paced back and forth.

"So," I said. And waited.

"You've probably noticed that I've been acting oddly."

"No," I said. "But Robyn has."

"Robyn," he groaned. "She would. What did she say?"

"That you've been acting oddly. What's going on?"

He hunched his shoulders. "I don't know where to begin, but I have to talk to someone about it. I can't take it any more. I feel as if I were going mad."

The doorbell rang at that moment. From past experience I knew that Connie wouldn't answer it while she was in the throes of creating dinner.

"Hold that thought," I said, rising. "That's probably Robyn now."

"Robyn? Here?" He rose also, his face strained.

"Yes," I said. "Should have told you right off, but Aunt Helena's gone missing. Gregory, too."

"What?" he asked. His hand yanked suddenly at his necktie.

"Hey—take it easy. I'm terrific with missing people, remember? We'll find her."

"You're also terrific with murders, but I like it better when you're dealing with strangers."

I reflected for a moment that Gary's work with insurance fraud was probably not rife with the emotional overtones of missing person cases. Or murder cases. Yet his reaction to Aunt Helena's vanishing was extravagant. He barely knew her and liked her even less. It took a hardy soul to tolerate her; many a saint fled at her approach. And yet the thought of her missing, trouble though she was, made me go cold inside.

"I have to get the door," I said as the doorbell rang again. He settled in a chair and rubbed his face tiredly.

"Gary's here," I told Robyn, forestalling her impatient jibe at the length of time it'd taken me to answer the door. "I told him about Aunt Helena. He's not taking it well."

"Why'd you tell him?" Robyn hissed. "This changes everything." She stormed into the den.

Gary stood diffidently as she plunged into the chair next to his, then he sat back down.

"Gary will treat this as confidential, of course," I said. "Robyn, you said there was 'something else' on the phone?"

"It's about the manuscript that Paul and I've been working on."

Gary grunted. Robyn turned on him in a flash. "I know you don't like it, Gary, but this is part of my work at the university. Both you and Micky knew that takes precedence over my agency assignments when you took me on."

"That's not it," he muttered. "Don't mind me. What does Paul have to do with Mrs. Cardex's vanishing?"

"Who's Paul?" I asked.

"My thesis advisor," she replied tersely. "Where have you been?"

"Laid up with diphtheria. Continue. What does Paul have to do with all this?"

"Nothing," Robyn said. "I don't know how we got on the subject of him. But Aunt knew about the manuscript. And since Wollstonecraft is an author she admires, she's been helping—or I should say—interfering with our work. Last night

"Wollstonecraft? Has the fever muddled my thinking? I thought you said the document was dated 1819. Mary Wollstonecraft died in the late 1700's."

"We've been trying to prove that Shelley wrote the Hiram poem. Aunt detests Shelley, so I fudged a bit with the name."

"Shelley? As in Percy B.? The poet?" Gary asked.

"No," I answered. "As in Mary

Shelley. Wollstonecraft was her mother. Robyn fudged more than a bit."

Connie slid open the office door and thumped a tray of spinach turnovers and mixed vegetable relishes onto my desk. "Dinner will be ready in fifteen minutes. Eat any later and it will be charcoal." She shifted her considerable girth, raked back her frizzled steel-gray hair, and glared at Robyn and Gary. "You're welcome to stay. I can stretch the sides."

"Thanks, Mrs. Eyrie," Robyn said. "That would be convenient."

"Not for me," Gary said at the same instant. "Don't want to be a bother."

"Bother you say," she growled. "All's a bother. Suit yourself. More for the cat and me tomorrow." She stumped out of the room, leaving the door ajar.

Robyn gently slid the door shut. "If she didn't cook like a wizard, Micky, I'd sack her."

"I don't think she likes me," Gary said sadly.

"She doesn't like anyone," I said. "Go on, Robyn. What about Mary Shelley? Was this manuscript another monster novel?"

"I loved *Frankenstein*." Gary smiled nostalgically. "My cousins and I would replay the movie over and over, then tie raw chicken necks to ourselves and use my mom's eyeliner to draw

stitches across our foreheads. Then we'd chase my kid brother around the basement."

"There weren't any chicken necks in the book." Robyn glared at him.

"I liked the part where he shouts, 'It's alive! It's alive!'" I coughed delicately. "Those of us who live with death find that part especially moving."

"That wasn't in the book either," Robyn said heatedly. "And Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* was more than a monster novel. It was about the struggle between conscience and experimental ethics. It redefined the concept of good. That's what's so thrilling about this manuscript. The poem focuses on the terrible beauty of the bronze work. It's the other side of the monster. The other side of what man's capable of creating. Victor Frankenstein's monster destroyed him. The bronzes gave Hiram life. Maybe they're a puddle of metal beneath the desert sand today, but it'll be forever remembered that the walls and floors of the temple in ancient Jerusalem once lived with Hiram's work."

"Uh-huh. And what does this have to do with Aunt Helena?"

Robyn took a turnover and stared at it unseeing. "She left a message on my machine. Said she had a meeting after dinner with someone who had evidence

that the Hiram poem was written by someone other than Mary Shelley." She looked at me with troubled eyes. "If she met with that person, he's the last one to see her."

"He?" I asked. "Was it a he?"

She frowned. "I don't know. I assumed so."

Gary leaned over. "Think, Robyn. What were her exact words?"

"She called at four yesterday afternoon. I was still at the university. Paul and I—well, that's not important. I didn't listen to the message till about midnight, and it was too late to call her then. Besides, I was angry. You know how she leaves messages? First off, she said our inquiry was proceeding too slowly. Then she said that because of 'my sluggish and slipshod research' (her words), she was forced to pursue the matter herself. She said she was outraged to discover that we were working with the premise that the author was Mary Shelley, not Wollstonecraft, and she ranted awhile about that. I'd like to know how she found out." She gave us an indignant look.

"Aunt Helena was bound to stumble on it." I grimaced kindly.

Gary was less understanding. "Your Paul probably told her."

"He didn't," she said. "He couldn't. Aunt Helena doesn't

even know him. She wound up her diatribe by saying that she had a source who knew it couldn't possibly be Mary Shelley and said she'd make contact that night. Sorry. I can't remember if she said contact with a him or her. I wish I'd archived the message. She made me so mad I couldn't wait to hit the erase button."

Gary touched her shoulder sympathetically. "She drives one to it."

"Her appointment book," I said. I grabbed the phone and punched in Aunt's number. "Frensham, it's Micky Cardex. Did Mrs. Cardex or Gregory have her appointment book when they left last night? Yes, I know it doesn't fit in her evening bag, but I've seen her sling it in the trunk of her car on occasion. Would you check her desk? Thanks." I drummed my fingers on my own desk, then helped myself to a marinated cucumber. Disease made my fingers tingle and sharpened the bitter taste of the vinaigrette.

"Yes? Terrific. Check the page for yesterday. Please, Frensham, it's not an invasion of privacy if the person in question has gotten herself abducted. No, I don't know that's happened, but yesterday's appointments might tell us. Yes? Uh-huh. Nothing after that?"

I glanced at the books surrounding me, but Aunt's whereabouts were not circumscribed there. "Frensham? Does she have a notepad near her phone? Nothing there? Try rubbing a pencil lightly across the page. Something there now? Yes, we've all seen that trick on television. How do you spell that? Got it. Yes, I'll keep in touch. No, I think it premature to put Luger in the kennel. Goodbye."

"Luger's her Chihuahua," I said at Gary's questioning look. "Frensham hates him."

"He's not the only one," Robyn growled. She snagged another spinach turnover and bit down hard.

"What did it say on the notepad?" Gary asked impatiently.

I tore off the note. "An address east of town. Near Monroe. Eleven hundred Sillveda Boulevard."

"That's near the campus," Robyn said. "I think it's an office building."

"She didn't write down an office number," I sighed. "We'd better check it out."

Connie appeared at the door. "Dinner is ready," she said sternly.

"Put it on the back burner," I said and grabbed a cardigan. "We've a clue to track down and an aunt to locate."

"Miss, chicken fricassee with garlic and sage cannot be put on

the back burner," she said in august tones.

"Then feed it to the cat," I said, ignoring Robyn's anguished look. "Aunt Helena may be in danger. There's no time to lose."

Outside, Gary left us at the curb, taking his own car back to the office to check for messages. As Robyn barreled down the dark streets towards the university, I wondered if the adrenaline surging through my veins was due to worry over Aunt Helena or the rapid decline of my endocrine system. I peered over my compact mirror at street signs while checking for lesions on my tonsils.

"I don't know who this 'source' of Aunt's is," Robyn finally burst out. "But the author of *Hūram's Hymn* has to be Mary Shelley."

"Why are you so sure of it?" I asked. "Shelley left poetry to her husband, didn't she? And Solomon's bronze worker seems an odd subject for her."

Robyn gave me a disbelieving look. "Come on. How would you know who Hūram was?"

"I've read the Old Testament. Hūram was the famous craftsman of Tyre who did all the bronzework in Solomon's temple."

"You just happen to know that?"

I brushed a languid hand across my brow. "Of course. I remember everything I read—that photographic memory of mine. And it might be a fresher impression because of that Olinder fellow last fall who wanted me to find the ten carts of bronze that Hiram made. He claimed he had evidence of their being in Beersheba. In Israel."

"You didn't take the case?"

"No. Olinder's a crackpot, and I had Dengue fever."

"I wonder what happened to those bronzes," Robyn mused. "From Shelley's description, they must have been incredible."

"I believe kings used some for ransoms," I said. "Others were pillaged in raids. By the time the Babylonians leveled the temple, probably not much of Hiram's work remained to be reduced to rubble." We pondered for a moment the transience of greatness.

"So why are you so sure Shelley's the author?" I asked. "She was more into Greek mythology than Christianity."

"The style was like hers. The penmanship similar. There was a line or two that showed the Godwin influence. You know that . . ."

"William Godwin, her father? Yes. A famous social theorist and sometimes novelist himself."

"The main reason was that

the manuscript was found in a trunk in a small house near Lake Geneva. The trunk belonged to Berthe Wolfe—born in 1800 and died in 1839. The house was near where the Shelleys lived, and it wouldn't be surprising if Berthe knew them. Also, the manuscript was in English. How many people in the Swiss Alps spoke literary English?"

I shrugged. "Probably scads of them. Weren't many Brits escaping there to flee the social strictures of the mad King George's reign? After all, that's why Percy and Mary were there. He had a wife in England."

"I don't know. I'm not a social historian."

"Hmm. Are you sure that Berthe didn't speak English?"

"Geeze, Micky. Who's the literary investigator here?"

"So who would you suspect of contacting Aunt Helena about the find?"

"We've been dealing with our own crackpots over this. Let's go to my office on campus after we check out the office building. I think I've got a list of people who've contacted us since the article about the manuscript request to the university came out."

"There's Sillveda Boulevard, and that should be the office building." I pointed to a three

story building of brick and glass on the corner of Monroe.

"Wait here," Robyn said, pulling close to the curb. "I'll be right back."

"What do you mean wait here?" I asked. "I'm going with you."

"In your pajamas?" Robyn asked.

I glanced down. I'd left home still clothed in my pale pink flannels. "It doesn't matter," I said with dignity. "No one will notice." Robyn's lips twitched in response.

I wrapped my cardigan around me as we walked to the office building. I ignored a couple of scandalized looks and was in turn ignored by most of the office employees hurrying home for a late dinner. We lurked around the building's directory trying to find a name we recognized. None sounded familiar.

"Can you remember these names with your famous photographic memory?" Robyn asked dryly. "We can compare them with the list in my office."

"No problem," I assured her.

We drove into the campus parking lot less than five minutes later. The hallways in the English Building were dimly lit and the stairwells shadowed. In the eerie after-hours setting both Robyn and I found ourselves speaking in whispers. She unlocked the door to her of-

fice. Compared to the spartan tidiness of her cubicle at La-Mare and Cardex, her tiny university den was a mountain range of papers and books threatening to avalanche.

"It's here somewhere," she said, her voice muffled as she delved under one of the piles.

Knowing this could take awhile, I wandered down the hall, peering into faculty offices and classrooms. Once a snoop . . . Outside, tall street lamps illuminated the paths cutting between the university buildings. I leaned against a cold window and wondered where Aunt Helena and Gregory were. If she were alive, I knew she'd give her captors a rocky time. If she were alive . . .

"May I help you?" A mellow voice sounded behind me. I whirled around and gaped at the vision there. The light in the hall was muddy, but I could see the quintessential professor standing before me. Dressed in tweed (yes, there were leather patches on his elbows), he quirked an eyebrow at me. He was about my height (I'm tall, though invalid thin), portly, and sported an unlit pipe in his hand.

"Let me guess," he said with a gentle smile. "You must be Micky Cardex, Wildemark's most illustrious detective."

I looked at him in surprise. I

couldn't dispute the illustrious bit. A few of my cases had captured media attention, but I couldn't imagine this sage knowing the flummery that riddled our newspapers. For all his cordial interest he looked better fit for dusty tomes and round-table discussions on Burns and Marlowe.

"The attire gave you away," he said.

I looked down and sighed. "Sir, I assure you this is not my usual dress for investigations."

"I didn't think so, but I did see an interview once where you wore similar togs."

"You saw that one? Rather good, didn't you think? For once the questions were intelligent. And I thought I handled it well, even though I had amnesia at the time."

"Amnesia?" His bushy gray eyebrows rose.

"Mmm. I recovered."

"I also deduced your identity from the open door to Robyn's office. She speaks of her cousin often."

The light dawned. "You are Paul, her thesis advisor?"

He bowed slightly. "Paul Hodges. It is a pleasure to meet you."

I shook his hand. "Dr. Hodges, the pleasure is indeed mine."

At that moment Robyn poked her head into the hallway. "Micky? I found it. Why, Dr.

Hodges—I didn't know you were here." She clutched the paper guiltily.

"You're here late, Robyn. Have a brainstorm?"

"Uh, no. Not exactly." She was sending me frantic signals.

"She's been updating me with the latest in literary research," I said smoothly. "It makes a nice break from murder."

"I would think so. Then I'll leave you to it." He saluted me with his pipestem and disappeared into his office. A light snicked on and puddled around the edges of his closed door.

"Let's see what you've got," I said, securing us in her office.

She spread the paper on her desk. "We've had about two dozen calls and about half that many people visiting in person," she said. "Recognize any of the names?"

"Lind." I pointed to a name halfway down the list. "James Lind's name was in the directory."

"Great. Let's go to the secretary's office and see what she has on Mr. Lind."

Moments later Robyn opened a file drawer and extracted a thin folder. "Ah. I see Mr. Lind sent a polite letter. Weird but polite. Then followed it up with increasingly hostile phone calls to the dean and Dr. Hodges. After being threatened with the police, he stopped calling and

hasn't been heard from since. The last call was about ten days ago."

"What's the gist of the letter?" I asked. I tried to read it over her shoulder, but the contents seemed to meander in pedantic allusions and metaphors.

"That the poem was not written by Mary Shelley, but by Berthe Wolfe. That her father was a biblical archaeologist and uncovered a great find that the family kept secret. He claims the poem was actually a code leading to a treasure trove of Hiram's famous bronzes."

"Make a copy of the letter and let's go back to your office," I said.

Back in her office, I unearthed Robyn's telephone book and found a business number for James Lind. A home number wasn't listed, and my contacts at the phone company reported that no home number or address for him existed. No one answered his business number, not even an answering machine.

We checked with Paul Hodges, who was cordially incurious with Robyn's questions. If he'd been given any phone number for Lind, the professor hadn't kept it.

On the way back to her office, she suddenly clutched my arm. "You don't think that James Lind is Gary LaMare, do you?"

I blinked. "What an extraordi-

nary leap. What made you think that?"

"The weird way he's been acting. You don't think . . . no, it's too preposterous."

I rubbed my arm ruefully. "I'd sooner suspect Gregory of carrying Aunt off." Simultaneously we halted and stared at each other. After a moment I shook my head. "The idea's impossible."

Robyn agreed. "The Chihuahua makes a better suspect."

I studied the letter again. The address on the letterhead was the office building at Sillveda and Monroe. "We'd better go back there and check it out," I told Robyn.

"Are we going to break in?" asked Robyn hopefully.

At that moment the phone rang. I pounced on it.

"Micky, listen carefully," Gary said hoarsely. "Aunt Helena and Gregory were kidnapped. Her abductors called a few minutes ago with their demands. Do you have a pencil?"

Less than two hours later Robyn, Gary, and I were on a plane for Denver, Colorado. Robyn hadn't needed to return to her apartment for luggage; she kept a gym bag with a change of clothes in her office. Before picking up Gary at his condominium, we stopped by my place.

Connie had packed an overnight bag for me while Robyn and I were breaking into James Lind's office.

"She forgot my medication," I groused to Robyn as the plane took off.

"For God's sake, Micky, shut up. This isn't about you and your alphabetical hypochondria. Aunt Helena and Gregory are in danger, maybe to the point of death. I don't need to hear about your idiotic distemper."

"Diphtheria," I corrected her. "I have diphtheria." Several passengers looked around in an interested manner. "Peaking, too, I'd imagine. As we launch this rescue operation in the wilds of the Rocky Mountains, I'm concerned that I might slip into a coma. And then where would we be?"

Robyn summoned up a smile for our audience. "Oh dear. Cousin Micky's having one of her spells. What an imagination, eh? Take a nap, hon. We'll be at the home soon."

"What home?" I asked, puzzled.

"Put a sock in it," Robyn hissed, then forced another smile for the passengers around us.

"Did you find anything at Lind's office?" asked Gary. I spared a moment of pity for him. A sudden call and a midnight flight were part of the job for

Robyn and me. Although Gary with his Richard Gere good looks seemed the hero type, he was actually more comfortable in his tastefully appointed office, his computer and appointment book close at hand. I wondered again why he'd insisted on coming with us and what he'd come to talk with me about earlier this evening. My one attempt at asking him while we waited to board the plane was met with "Not now. We'll talk later." And then an unreadable look at Robyn.

"Lind's office?" I gathered my thoughts. "A phone sitting on the floor—nothing else. Not even a smudge or a particle of dust. Wish we'd had time to question the people in the offices around his. By the time we got there, even the custodial staff had left."

"Want me to ask Amato to check it out tomorrow? I mean today."

Chuck Amato was one of Gary's insurance investigators. I'd used his services before.

"Hopefully we'll be deep in the mountains before the office opens tomorrow. Better rest now," I advised. "It's going to be a long day."

We landed before two A.M. While Robyn stood in line at the rental counter for a four-wheel-drive Jeep, Gary drew me aside.

"The more I think about it,"

he said, "the more suspicious I'm finding that Professor Paul Hodges. I think he's the one who kidnapped Mrs. Cardex and Greg."

I stared at him. "Gary, he's a respected professor. Why would you suspect him?"

He shot a look at Robyn and lowered his voice. "Academics are cutthroats. The guy's probably hungry for tenure and will do anything to get it."

"I'm sure he has tenure. What would be the point?"

"Publicity." He gave me an intense look. "For his daft ideas."

"Those daft ideas are also Robyn's," I said dryly. "Or do you think she's in on this, too?"

"Of course not, but you know how easily she's taken in by these rugged literary types."

I gave him a puzzled look. "But he's not . . ."

"I've got the keys," Robyn interrupted. Not having heard her approach, Gary and I jumped. "Ready to go?"

A few minutes later we were on the highway. In less than an hour we passed through Boulder, where treeless mountains with sheer rock faces loomed before us, dark and forbidding. We took the narrow canyon highway past the falls, towards Eldora and Nederland.

According to instructions, we cut off onto a dirt road labeled Beggan's Sluice on the map,

near a sharp bend in Boulder Creek. We jounced for another mile on a deeply rutted road that ran beside a brook. I could smell pine on the cool night air.

The road ended at a shack surrounded by cottonwood and scrub oak. We rolled to a stop, and Robyn killed the engine.

"What now?" whispered Gary. He gripped his briefcase tightly.

"Wait here," I whispered back. "Robyn, follow me."

The small clearing in front of the shabby cabin was hushed. Not a leaf stirred. No smoke rose from the ragged chimney. No light flickered behind the glassless windows.

I was under no illusion that we'd arrived unheralded, yet we were not met by warning shout or gun barrel. I peered cautiously in a window near the front door, pushing away the tattered window shade. It unveiled a roughhewn room inhabited by a couch with springs jutting through torn fabric and a few dusty chairs. But no people.

"Micky," Robyn hissed next to me and motioned her head toward the firewood stacked next to a Franklin stove. Near an untrimmed log was Aunt Helena's black-spangled evening purse.

"Seen enough?" a voice growled near us.

We sprang back from the window. I immediately castigated myself for not sending one of us

around to the back of the cabin. A man dressed in dusty jeans and plaid miner's shirt stood ten feet away, partly hidden by the brambles creeping up the side of the house. The moonlight gleamed on the shiny barrel of his shotgun.

"Micky?" Gary called. He stood near the Jeep holding his briefcase like a weapon.

"It's okay," I called back softly. "Stay where you are."

"You all stay where you are," said the man. He moved towards Robyn and me, raising his gun. Robyn moved discreetly back, readying herself for a strike. I groped for her wrist and squeezed it. She relaxed somewhat but continued to watch him warily.

"Where are Mrs. Cardex and Gregory?" I asked.

"Safe," he said. "For now." He gave us a wolfish grin.

"If you've . . ." Robyn began. I gave her wrist another warning squeeze, and she subsided with a glare.

"Inside," he ordered. "You too." He motioned Gary into the cabin. I crowded Robyn through the door. She gave me a frustrated look as she passed close to him. Her urban combat training at the community center had prepared her for battle, not surrender. I wanted to know if he was alone and where Aunt and Gregory were. I felt he might be

more amenable to discussion on *his* side of the gun.

Gary sat carefully on a rickety chair near the stove. After glancing at the dusty floor, he kept his briefcase on his lap. For a business executive and sometime insurance fraud investigator, he was handling captivity at gunpoint well.

I turned to Aunt's kidnapper. "Lind, I presume?"

"I've used that name," he acknowledged. "Before I release Mrs. Cardex and her secretary, you're going to do some detective work for me."

"Do I know you?" I asked. "You seem familiar."

"We've met." He nodded slightly. "Now let's get down to business." He ducked away from my puzzled look.

"Where are Mrs. Cardex and Gregory?" I asked again.

"You'll see them after you do as I say. You've read Wolfe's poem. I've cracked the code and know where the Hiram bronzes are."

"Where are Mrs. Cardex and Gregory?" I repeated forcefully.

"The bronzes are in Beersheba. I'm not sure where exactly. It's up to you to find them."

My eyes narrowed on him. "You're Olinder. You came to see me last fall about this."

"That's right. I figured the only way you'd work for me was if I hijacked your aunt. I didn't

know it then, but this poem clinches my hypothesis. The bronzes do exist, and they're in Beersheba."

"Where are Mrs. Cardex and Gregory?" I growled.

"Uh, Micky," whispered Robyn. "Maybe some tactful negotiating is called for here."

I stood slowly and menaced him with a look. "Where are Mrs. Cardex and Gregory?" I roared.

"Oh yeah. That'll bring him around," Robyn muttered sourly.

"They're in a mine beyond the cabin," he said smugly. "You'll not find them. There are dozens of holes back there. When you've located the bronzes, I'll tell you where they are."

Robyn was at my side in a flash. "If you've hurt them . . ."

"They're safe," he said. "In fact, they're not even aware they've been shanghaied. They're back there digging through a mine, thinking that's where the bronzes are. I gave Mrs. Cardex a copy of the poem, and lickety-split she decides there's treasure in one of those holes. Funny how she got to that deduction. I even let her pick the mine. She's happily detecting away, but I think Gregory suspects something funny's going on. He's been acting put out and persecuted since we left yesterday."

"That's the way Gregory always acts," Gary said.

"Well, I wouldn't wonder. Mrs. Cardex is one contrary woman. I'd hurry with finding Hiram's trove if you want her back safe. I guarantee nothing if you tarry."

"Don't threaten us, Olinder," I said. "We're leaving with Mrs. Cardex and Gregory. Bring them here immediately."

"I'll fetch no one nowhere till you find those bronzes. That's the deal."

"You ass," I said. "There are no bronzes." I ignored Robyn's frantic tugs at my arm and her bleatings about diplomacy. "There are no ox carts, no lavers, no lions, no cherubim. When the temple was destroyed, the last of Hiram's work went with it."

"Not true," Olinder sputtered. "I have my notes. You can check my conclusions yourself."

I sank back in my chair and rubbed my eyes wearily. "I don't need to see anything. You said yourself that Aunt Helena read the poem and believes the bronzes are buried here in the Rockies. Robyn and Dr. Hodges read it and imagine it's a social piece about the lasting honor of creating something glorious."

"You look at it," he insisted, thrusting a heap of papers at me. "What do you suppose it says?"

I shoved his hand aside. "I've read it," I said. "It's a poem

about a man who had a job to do and did it." I stood up. "Gary, call the police. We're done dealing with Mr. Olinder. Let the officials have a go at it."

Robyn's eyes widened as Gary pulled a cellular phone from his briefcase. Olinder made an abortive movement with his gun. "Stop," he said. "I still have hostages."

The front door suddenly opened. As Olinder swung around, Robyn leapt forward and kicked the shotgun out of his hands. It skittered across the floorboards and collided with the woodpile. Gary bent down and gingerly picked it up. I stepped over and took it from him.

"I'll take care of that," I told him. "Make the call." I leveled the gun at Olinder.

"Michaela," thundered a familiar voice. "What is the meaning of this? What are you doing to Mr. Lind?"

"Hello, Aunt," I said. "We're holding him here till the police come to arrest him. Are you okay?"

"Put that ridiculous gun down. Of course I am fine. What a question. Mr. Lind and I are partners in a quest to find the famous bronzes of King Solomon. I demand you release the poor man at once."

I risked a look at Aunt Helena, and she did indeed look fine. Her silver hair was dusted

with red dirt. Her hands, face, and clothes were smudged as well. Gregory was blackened from head to wretched toe. He watched us mournfully.

The "poor man" Olinder scowled ferociously at me. His hands twitched with frustration and rage. I took a stronger grip on the shotgun.

"Sorry, Aunt. I can't do that. But may I say you've never looked better?"

On the plane ride home, I declined rapidly. I wasn't surprised. I usually required twelve or more hours of sleep when ailing, with frequent naps during the other twelve. Not that I begrudged it them, but rescuing Aunt and Gregory had taken its toll.

Robyn sat next to me, ignoring my fevered moans. Gary slept behind us. Gregory and Aunt Helena sat a dozen rows forward. She hadn't spoken to us since the police arrived at the cabin. She refused to press charges, but Gary willingly offered a score of accusations. They didn't keep us at the station more than a few hours. It seemed Hiram's bronzes were a longstanding fixation of Olinder's, and he had a string of charges associated with his obsession. After signing a statement, we were on our way.

"Micky—do you really believe

Wolfe is the author of *Huram's Hymn*?" I opened one eye to find Robyn studying me anxiously.

I sighed. "How should I know, Rob? I can't tell an umlaut from an omelette."

"Then you were just bluffing when you told Olinder that Wolfe was the author?"

I shrugged. "As I said, I'm no literary investigator. I usually approach my own cases with a simple axiom—stretching can improve your reach, but the right answers are generally close at hand."

She was silent for a moment. "You're saying that Mary Shelley was a reach and that Berthe Wolfe is the closer solution?"

"I'd check to see if Wolfe spoke English. It wasn't unusual for European females to be educated in England then."

Diphtheria trickled through my veins and slowly faded away breath by breath. I heard Aunt Helena harass a flight atten-

dant, then her overnight case skidded down the aisle and spilled open. Things were back to normal.

"And how about Gary?" Robyn finally asked. "What's been eating him?"

I peered around my seat and nudged Gary awake. "Hey. Did you know that Paul Hodges is old enough to be Robyn's father?"

"What?" Gary blinked at me sleepily.

"I said that Paul Hodges is a very charming *older* man who's Robyn's advisor. That's it. Nothing else."

"Great." He yawned. "Glad to hear it." His eyes closed.

I settled back in my seat. Robyn stared at me quizzically. "What was that all about?"

I grinned. "The answer was right next to me. I'll let you figure it out. Just don't forget about the monsters that men can make of nothing."

FICTION

Of Death and Dogs

Clyde Haywood

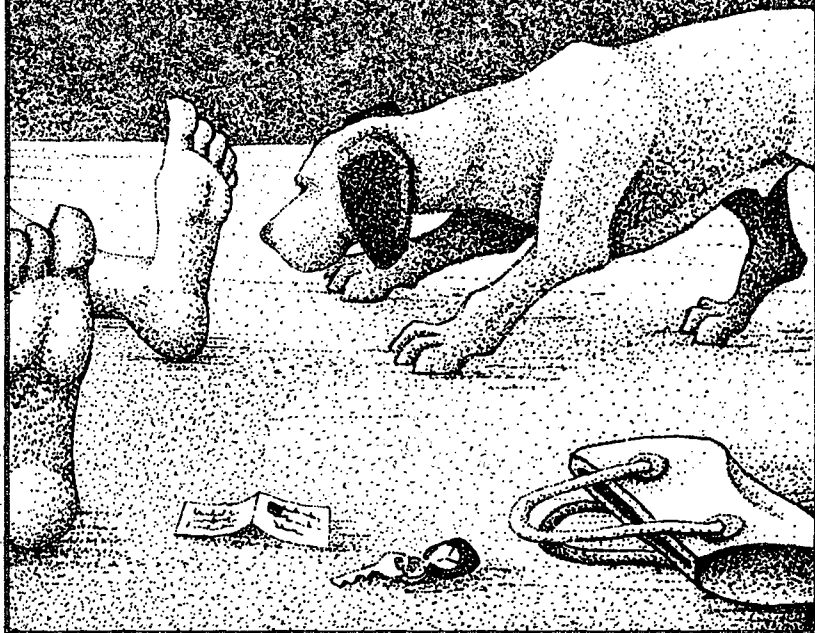


Illustration by Jeff Colson

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 9/96

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The Monday that we found out about the first murder, I had wanted it to be a quiet day. Of course you always want it to be quiet when you're working homicide, but I especially did when Abe Stein was gone. It was all right that morning, but just after me and Billy got back from lunch, Doris buzzed us from dispatch.

"We got a 911 caller," she cackled through the speaker phone. "Sounds like an adult white male. Screaming that a girl's dead. That she's been murdered."

I grabbed my jacket off the back of the chair.

"Address?" I yelled into the box.

"Took me minutes to calm him down enough to give it to me," she said. "Southside Townhomes. Unit 223G. That's down off I-77, near Highway 51."

"I got it," I told her. "We got a blue-and-white in the area?"

"Yeah," she said. "We got lucky. Luther Sutton's about a mile from there in a two-man unit. I told them to get over there and secure the scene if it's real and tell us if it's not. Who's going from Homicide, Jack?"

"Me," I told her. "And I'll take Billy Burns along."

"Right," she said. "Abe's not there, is he?"

The address was out near the city limits. It would take most of

twenty-five minutes to get there even going code three. Halfway out, Billy said, "Damn I hope it's a false alarm."

We always hope that in Homicide. But just as he finished saying it, Luther Sutton's big, deep voice came booming out of the radio, saying, "We're at the scene as dispatched. White female dead. Apparent homicide. We'll secure and await detectives. Over."

We really floored it then, going as fast as we could without risking another killing. When we got to the address in a right new townhouse complex, the patrol cops had already put up the yellow tape that's supposed to tell everybody to stay away but usually causes everybody to crowd around. Since it was early afternoon on a workday in a mostly singles complex, we didn't see a crowd, just the tape that told us real quick which unit we wanted.

Luther Sutton, an old uniform troop who's been around since dirt was invented, let us into the front room of the unit. Near the back wall, past a pretty little living room suite and a Formica dining table, lay the naked body of a young woman. There was shiny red blood all around her—too dried to be a pool any longer but not yet dry enough to be just a stain. She had been dead for some hours but not yet twenty-

four, I'd say. I'm no Abe Stein, but I'd seen enough murder scenes to make that good guess.

The victim was lying on her back. I could see a single wound in her left chest. It was neat, what you might call surgical.

We could hear a small dog yapping behind a closed door under the stairs.

"I had to throw the little mutt in the john and shut the door," said Luther. "Otherwise we haven't touched anything. Citizen that found the body said he didn't touch nothing but the phone."

When he said the word "citizen," Luther gestured toward a front corner of the room. His partner, a rookie, was standing there with a civilian, both of them about the color of cold cigar ashes and both of them looking away from the body.

The civilian said his name was Bob Smith. He was a white guy in a grey suit who looked about as plain as his name. When I told him we needed to talk to him, he asked if we could do it outside.

I could see that he had already thrown up on his suit, and I didn't have any burning desire to stay in the room with the corpse either. So after I made sure that Luther had called the crime scene techs to take pictures and check for prints and such, me and Billy took Smith

out to the squad car to interview him.

Man, was he shook up! We had to list him as a suspect, but as I saw him at the time, either he was telling us the truth, or he was a better actor than any I've seen on the tube lately.

"Who was the dead woman?" I asked him.

"Diane Ray," he said. "She worked with me in bookkeeping at Belk's Stores offices. I was her supervisor."

"Did she live here?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "I think she'd been out here about a year."

"How come you to be out here in the middle of a business day to find her body, Mr. Smith?"

"She didn't come in this morning. She was real dependable, so we all thought that was strange. But she had been off on two weeks' vacation, and we thought maybe she was just off schedule and overslept."

"But when a couple of hours went by and she still hadn't come in, I called and got no answer. I was a little concerned, but since she'd been on a trip, I thought maybe her plane had been delayed. Then at lunch-time her friend Vera from inventory control came over looking for her, said Diane had called her yesterday evening and told her she was back home and would see her for lunch today around noon."

"So when we called again and still didn't get any answer, I came out to check on her."

"You didn't call any other friends or relatives?" Billy asked. "You just left work and charged out here?"

I had been a good cop so far. Billy was trying to be a little more of a bad cop. Not too bad, though. Just looking at this guy made it hard to suspect him of anything.

Smith shook his head. "Nobody to call. I pulled her personnel file, but the 'person to notify in emergency' was Vera, and the 'nearest living relative' was her mother over in Tennessee."

"So you just leave the office to go out and check on workers that don't show up?" Billy sounded slightly badder than he had before.

Smith flared back at him. I wouldn't have thought he had it in him. "One as dependable as Diane. Especially when she'd told Vera she'd be there for lunch."

I wondered if having a spark of hidden fire in him meant maybe he had something else he wasn't showing.

Maybe he would be a real suspect.

"How long did it take you to get here?" I asked. "Ain't those offices all the way downtown?"

"No," he said. "We've moved

over to Southpark Mall. I doubt it took me fifteen minutes."

"How'd you get in?" Billy asked. "You got a key?"

If he did, we might have a prime suspect.

"No, I don't have a key. When I knocked and called out and Diane didn't answer, I tried the door. It wasn't locked. I stepped in and saw her there like that." He swallowed hard.

"What did you do then?" I asked.

"I couldn't do anything for a minute. Shock, I guess. Then I threw up. Then I saw the phone and dialed 911."

I took him through everything he knew about the victim. She was in her late twenties, which I had guessed from looking at her. Fairly attractive, which I could tell since the body wasn't mangled.

She dated occasionally, but Smith didn't know of any guy that was special. Vera was her best friend, but he named a couple of others from work that we would probably want to talk to, and of course we would.

"What do you know about this vacation trip?" I asked.

"She went to the Bahamas," he said. "She'd saved up for it for a long time. Said it was something she'd always wanted to do, and since she was nearly thirty, she was tired of waiting for some Prince Charming to take

her, so she was going to take herself."

He started to cry then. We let him sob a few minutes before Billy asked him, "Any way of knowing if she met Prince Charming after she got there? I mean, anybody hear from her?"

Smith shrugged. "We got a card. It didn't say anything. Just 'Wish you were here,' or something like that. And like I said, she called Vera yesterday after she got back, but Vera said they just talked a minute. Diane said she was tired and ready for bed and she would tell her all about the trip over lunch."

"Where were you last night?" Billy asked him.

"I was at church," said Smith. "And choir practice after."

That kind of shut Billy up. Charlotte's still southern enough that a lot of churches do have evening worship on Sunday, and it was likely that our first suspect had an alibi, depending on when the medical examiner put the time of death.

While we were talking to Smith, the crime scene lab team had arrived and gone into the apartment to do their thing. I told Smith he could go but that we might need to talk to him later. Me and Billy went in to see if we could learn anything from the scene search.

We couldn't. Not much anyway. Blood was pretty much all

in the one place, so she might have been killed right where she was lying. Like I said, she was nude. There was a terry cloth robe and a pair of cotton pajamas on a chair several feet from the body—neatly folded and not torn like maybe she had put them there herself, or maybe the killer was a neat freak.

In fact, except for the blood the whole place was neat. No sign of a struggle. The dog had pooped back in a corner. We could still hear the poor little thing yapping and howling in the lavatory, and all of us wondered where it had been when its mistress was killed.

All put together, we figured it was somebody she knew, maybe somebody she was getting it on with. Somebody the dog wouldn't raise hell about right off. Even a little dog can send a stranger back into the night.

As the week and our investigation went on, we figured more and more the same way. One of the neighbors said she'd heard the dog barking on Sunday night, but it wasn't raising hell, just happy yaps like a small dog makes when it's greeting somebody it knows.

As we suspected, the medical examiner determined she'd had sex shortly before she died. He didn't find any definite signs of force, though. There was a little vaginal tearing, but that didn't

necessarily make it rape. It still could have been a boyfriend.

There was semen present—probably from an O positive secreter, which could be about half the men in the world.

The search techs didn't get anybody's prints but hers and Smith's, except for two partials on the lavatory door that turned out to be Luther's. Smith's were only on the phone and the door-knob.

As things developed, it didn't look like Smith was our guy. The medical examiner put the time of death between seven thirty and eleven thirty. Smith could establish that he was at choir practice twenty miles away until almost ten. He said he went home alone after that, so he could have done it, but he would have had to be fast.

We interviewed everybody we knew of who knew her, and everybody they knew of, too. We canvassed the neighborhood apartment by apartment asking about strange cars, strange men, strange noises.

When a week had gone by, we didn't know anything more, but we still thought it was somebody she knew. We thought that way up until the next Monday afternoon when we learned about the second murder.

The newspaper started writing about the "Sunday Evening Slayer" and speculating on a se-

rial killer, even though they didn't know near as much about the similarities as we did. All they knew was that the victim was another young, single woman who lived and died in an apartment on the south side of town—less than two miles from Diane Ray's. The reporters did find out that both bodies were nude and that each was killed by a single stab wound, with no weapon left at the scene.

But they didn't know that the medical examiner said the two wounds were made with an identical long narrow blade, nor that the second victim—Marlene Shook—like the first was fresh back from a two week vacation. They didn't know that her garments—this time shorts and a T-shirt—were folded neatly on a chair near the body, nor that she'd had sex with an O positive secreter shortly before she died. Again there was blood only around the body. Again there was no sign of a struggle. Again there were no fingerprints of value.

Just like the other time, the victim's little dog was running free in the apartment when a neighbor found the body Monday afternoon. The neighbor, an older woman, had a key she was returning, along with the victim's mail.

Neither that neighbor nor any other had seen or heard any-

thing out of the ordinary Sunday night. Maybe the little dog was yapping some, but not cutting up like its person was being killed or like a stranger was breaking in.

Me and Billy got the assignment on that one, too, since it was a probable related case to the one we had. That's when Billy finally said what both of us had been thinking. "Damn, I wish Abe Stein was here."

Abe Stein is a homicide detective. 'Course me and Billy are too, on paper. But we're just two Charlotte cops assigned to work that duty. That's what we *do*. It's what Abe *is*. If you picked the three of us up out of Charlotte and set us down in Chicago or New York or probably Moscow, me and Billy would be looking for a job. Abe would be looking for a killer. He'd find him, too.

But wishing for Abe wouldn't solve a pair of murders, so me and Billy went on plodding after the Sunday Evening Slayer. We talked to everybody we could find who knew Marlene Shook and went back and reinterviewed all the leads on the first case looking for something to connect her to Diane Ray—or possibly to Bob Smith. We were still looking on Thursday night when Abe Stein got back from Israel.

Soon as Abe could get down-

town, he had a meeting in the property room with us and the search techs to go over everything we had found out—what little there was of it. When we finished filling Abe in, he asked right off for the contents of the victims' purses.

"We got that," one of the techs told him. "But there's not much in them."

He handed Abe a pair of large, clear-plastic evidence envelopes. Abe flipped through their contents quickly, like an old-time banker counting greenbacks.

That's when he started to show that he's a real homicide detective and me and Billy ought to transfer to traffic squad.

"Where's the kennel receipt?" he asked.

"What receipt?" said Billy.

Abe said, "The kennel bills. We've got a single woman living alone. She's gone off for two weeks. She's got her dog back. She must have picked it up from a kennel sometime on Sunday afternoon. She paid the kennel. We should find a credit card slip or receipted bill in both of these purses. But there's not one in either of them. Did you bag their trash?"

One of the lab guys brought out two more big plastic evidence envelopes. Both of them were almost empty.

"There's not much in either one of them," he said, glancing at the inventory sheets attached to the envelopes. "Just a couple of scraps from one meal. Looks like a dogfood can in one of them."

"No kennel papers of any kind?" Abe asked.

The lab man shook his head. "Maybe they ditched them somewhere before they got home," he said.

"Not bloody likely," said Stein. "One, maybe. Not two. Did you search their cars?"

"Yeah," I told him. We had done all the right things. We just hadn't drawn the right conclusions.

"Got inventory sheets on their contents?" Abe asked.

We did. No kennel receipts.

We went through everything we had twice. No kennel papers.

One of the lab techs said, "Why would anybody take them girls' kennel receipts?"

"Because he didn't want us to connect the murdered woman with that kennel," Abe told him.

I was glad me and Billy hadn't asked that question.

Abe turned to me and asked, "Anybody pulled their bank and credit card records?"

"Yeah," I told him. "We had just started going over them to see how many common contacts we could match up."

Truth was, we had just *barely*

started. It had looked like it was going to be heavy. What with both of them being single and about the same age and living in the same part of town, the same grocery stores and restaurants and what-have-you were bound to keep turning up.

"Chances are they'd used the vet or kennel before," said Abe. "Where are those records?"

"Over in homicide," Billy told him.

Back in our own office we spread the two women's lives out on our desks in the form of canceled checks, credit card printouts, and book slips. We had every piece of financial paper we had been able to pull out of the victims' apartments or persuaded their banks and creditors to locate. We divided the mass of papers among us and started looking for anything that might tell us where either woman had boarded her dog.

In less than half an hour we learned that Marlene Shook had used her Mastercard three times in the past two years at Southside Veterinary Clinic and had written two checks to them.

Either Diane's dog was healthier or she didn't leave it as much or both. Anyway, we only turned up three transactions she'd had with a veterinarian, all paid by check and all to the Southside clinic. One check said right on it that it was "for dog boarding."

Abe pulled the yellow pages out of a drawer and turned to the V's. He located the clinic. The address was just south of the city limits, not more than three miles from either victim's apartment. The ad listed pet boarding among the services offered and showed a Dr. K. D. Bertram as the proprietor.

"You think that dog doctor is our man?" Billy asked.

"Him or somebody connected with him," said Abe. "Let's see what we can find out about him."

We didn't find a trace of K. D. Bertram in the department records—not even a traffic citation. The city directory showed a home address just a couple of blocks from the clinic.

"Ain't much to go on," I said.

"Not anything," said Abe. "What we need next is a vet we can trust. Joe Owens all right with you guys?"

"Yeah. Doc Owens is great," said Billy.

Owens was the vet who had the contract to look after all the security dogs for the county.

"All right," said Abe. "We'll use Joe. Now, where are those dogs?"

Up until that question, I'd thought Abe just wanted a local vet so he could find out whatever the people in the business knew about Dr. Bertram. He did, but that wasn't all he wanted. He figured that with the

dogs being so quiet when their owners were getting killed, maybe the killer had done something to them, and maybe a vet could tell what.

Abe never acted like we were stupid for not thinking of things like that. I'd never quite decided whether I ought to appreciate him for not putting me down or be ticked off at him for having such low expectations of me to begin with.

Either way we had to tell him that we had turned the Ray dog over to the dead woman's parents. But the other one, Marlene Shook's, was still down at the county kennels.

It was nearly midnight, but Abe went right ahead and called Doc Owens anyway. Owens is the kind of person we call a police buff. He's tickled to death to have us need his help at any time, day or night. His wife might not be, but being an old bachelor, Abe don't think much about that kind of thing.

Abe got through to Doc. Me and Billy were just hearing Abe's end of the conversation.

"What do you know about Dr. K. D. Bertram?" he asked.

There was a long silence while Abe stood there and nodded his head just like he thought Doc could see him.

Finally he said, "She sounds good all right."

Of course when Abe said

"she," that sort of took Dr. Bertram out of the category of O positive secreter that we were looking for.

Abe talked with Owens a few more minutes and made arrangements for him to examine Marlene Shook's dog. Then he hung up and filled me and Billy in on what Doc Owens knew about Dr. Bertram.

"I guess you gathered that the dead women's vet is a woman. Joe Owens knows her well and thinks very highly of her. I still think her clinic is the link to the killer. Since it's not the vet, it may be somebody who works for her."

Even Abe couldn't think of anything else that we had to do right then, so he let us go home and get some rest, planning to start back in early the next day. Before we parted, we all agreed that we had to handle Dr. K. D. Bertram real carefully. Somebody who worked for her was likely to be a murderer. He had killed at least two women—maybe more that we didn't even know about. If we approached her for help, how would she react? Would she believe what we told her?

Friday morning Billy rode to work with me. When we got to the office where Abe was waiting, we were talking about whether we ought to go ahead and make contact with Dr. Ber-

tram or do some more snooping around first.

Abe said, "There's no choice, boys. We have to talk to her today."

Billy said, "Don't that risk tipping off the killer, maybe spook him?"

"I'm afraid so," said Abe. "But we'll hold the risk down some by going through Doc Owens instead of barging into the clinic. Anyway, the risk of not getting into that clinic is a whole lot worse than the risk of tipping off the killer."

"You mean the risk that he might kill another one?" I asked.

Abe nodded.

Billy said, "If he holds to pattern, we should have at least two days. He kills on Sunday evenings."

Abe shook his head. "That's not the pattern," he said. "He doesn't kill on Sundays. He kills on the evening that a woman gets back from vacation. Not everybody gets home on Sunday. I got home on Thursday night."

That made me feel a little guilty that neither of us had asked Abe about his trip to Israel, especially since he'd been talking about going as long as I'd known him. But every year he always said he just couldn't spare the time from whatever case he was working on, until finally the brass told him he had to take some of that accumulat-

ed leave time and ordered him out of the office. I didn't feel too awful guilty, though, because I figured he'd rather talk about murder anyway.

"It has to be like this," Abe went on. "At any kennel when you board a dog these days, you've got to fill out a form like you were leaving your child somewhere. Killer's got access to the form, he knows a customer's address, her phone number. He knows her next of kin or at least a person to notify, which tells him she lives alone. He knows when she's getting back from vacation, which tells him she's likely to be home that night, resting up after a trip. So far that's been on Sunday night, but the next one could be on Saturday, or even tonight. We have to act now."

We did. First we went over to the county kennels to pick up Marlene Shook's little dog. On the way, Billy asked Abe, "How come you know so much about a vet's records, Stein, you ain't got no dog?"

"How come you don't?" said Abe. "You do have one."

"Wife always takes ours," said Billy.

"You married guys don't do anything for yourselves," said Abe.

"You still ain't said why you know so much," said Billy.

Abe said, "Billy, it's an infor-

mation source. I've used vet records before to do background investigations on victims and track the movements of suspects."

Billy shut up then, and I reckon Abe hoped he'd taught him a little more about investigation and taught me a little, too, while he was at it.

Anyway, Abe got the little dog from the county, and we took it on over to Doc Owen's office. First thing when we got there we explained to Doc what we needed him to do. He called Dr. Bertram.

"K. D.?" he said as soon as she got on the line. "I need to see you bad, and I need to see you quick."

There was a pause.

"No, K. D., I can't come over there. If you can come over here, I'll explain it all," he said.

After another short pause, he said, "Noon?" and looked at Abe.

Abe nodded.

"Noon's fine, K. D.," said Doc. "I'll see you then or a little after, here at my office. Thanks a lot."

Then Doc took the little Shook dog off to work on it. The poor little thing had been huddled up against Abe's chest like he was its mama ever since we'd picked it up from the county kennel. When Doc took it away from Abe, it cowed down so dismal it looked like a sock.

puppet somebody had just pulled his hand out of.

For the next little while me and Abe and Billy went back over everything we knew about the murders. Abe made a few phone calls, and we paced the floor. Then Doc came out with some little bottles of fluid and said he needed to get them over to a lab. Billy said he'd take them. Then Abe sat Doc down and asked him what more could he tell us about Dr. Bertram before she got there.

Doc said K. D. Bertram—when he said it, it came out “Kadie” like a name, not like two initials—was the straightest of straight arrows. She had finished vet school with honors back when vets were still mostly men but not so long ago that a woman vet was a freak.

Seemed like she must have loved her field because she had worked long hard hours ever since Owens had known her, and she was regarded in the profession as just about the best animal doctor around. She was a leader in the local veterinary association—past president and a member of the board. And besides all that, she was just an all around nice person who would do anything in the world for you. After all, wasn't she hurrying over to his place in the middle of a business day just because he had said he needed her to?

Abe asked him did she have any boyfriend or kinfolk that could be a suspect.

“No,” said Doc. “She doesn't have any close family. And outside the veterinary association and the Southside Methodist Church, I don't think she has any social life, at work all the time.”

About eleven thirty Joe's assistant ushered in a slim, attractive woman in a white lab coat. She looked a good ten years younger than what Doc had said K. D. Bertram had to be, even if her hair was getting kind of silvery.

“Joe,” she called out. “I was able to move a couple of appointments and get here a little sooner. You sounded so . . .”

She saw me and Abe and stopped. Joe introduced us. Like all police buffs he had to throw in the titles with the names. “Kadie, this is Detective Jack Rogers from Homicide. Fellows, this is Dr. K. D. Bertram that I've been telling you about.”

When he said that part about us being homicide detectives, she got this mixed-up expression on her face—confused, curious, just a little scared, like an honor student who's been called to the principal's office. She knows she hasn't done anything, but she's still wondering why she's there.

Abe said, “We're investigating

the deaths of two young women who were murdered in South Charlotte the last two weekends."

She spoke up quickly. "Yes, Marlene Shook and the Ray girl. It's so tragic they were both clients of ours . . . oh . . . that's why I'm here, isn't it?"

Abe nodded. "Yes, we need your help with the investigation. But before we tell you any more, we need your promise that you'll hold everything we tell you in absolute confidence."

He leaned toward her just a little like he was listening for her answer. Abe is funny. On the job he can work people like a real good fly fisherman works trout water. He was about to lure her into our project head first, just like he had Doc Owens, and she wasn't even a police buff—at least she wasn't up till then. Of course she assured him she'd do whatever she could and promised to keep it all secret.

Off the job, if you had introduced him to a woman as impressive and goodlooking as K. D. Bertram, he would have got plumb tongue-tied. My wife and Billy's used to try to fix him up, but after a while they just gave up.

Abe told Dr. Bertram, "We need the names of all your male employees, any man who would have access to your files and rec-

ords. And we need to know if any single woman has a pet boarding with you right now. Especially any who might be coming back for it this weekend."

"May I know why?" she asked—not with any anger, I don't think, just surprise or maybe curiosity.

Mostly cops are pretty secretive. Mostly we don't give civilians reasons. But since we were pulling her into this investigation, I thought Abe might figure there wasn't any harm in telling her.

He didn't answer right off, though. He just sat there and looked right straight into her eyes for what seemed like a lot longer than it really was.

Then she said, "Oh. I understand. I know Marlene had just picked her dog up the evening she was killed, and I guess Diane Ray had, too, hadn't she? I didn't know her that well, and I had someone else covering that weekend. It didn't register."

Then it got quiet again like everybody was waiting on everybody else to say something.

Finally Abe spoke up. "So you see why we need to know if there's another young woman coming back to claim a pet? And why we don't want anybody to know we're asking? Because we believe that a male employee of yours is the killer, and we don't

want to spook him until we're ready to prove it."

"It couldn't be," she said. "There are only three men in my office—really two men and a boy. None of them could do something like this."

Abe didn't argue with her exactly. He never much argues with anybody. He just said, "It's somebody who has access to your records, to information about your customers."

About that time Doc's receptionist buzzed and said that Billy was on the phone for Doc. He took the call right there in the office.

Doc said "uh-huh" four or five times. Then he said, "We'll see you in a few minutes," and hung up.

He turned around to Abe. "The lab tests were positive for metabolites of a powerful sedative. That little dog would likely have been unconscious when the slayer was doing her owner."

He was looking at Abe as he spoke, but he kind of glanced over at Dr. Bertram like he was trying to be sure that she got it. "Kadie might want to check her drug inventory, too," he said.

Abe turned back to her. "Okay. We need a list of every man who has access to your clients' records," he said.

Abe never sounded overbearing. He just asks folks for things like he expects to get them, so

usually he does. Kind of like when a telephone operator asks what number you're calling it wouldn't occur to you not to tell her.

Dr. Bertram gave him the names.

She held up one finger. "There's Isaac Polk," she said. "Joe, you know Ike. He's an older black man, retired from the railroad. He's been with me for years. He cleans up, helps with baths, does whatever we need him to. He couldn't kill anyone. He's a saint. The kindest, gentlest man you'll ever know."

Abe made some notes on a pad he always carries around.

A second finger went up. "Tommy Coleman. He's just a teenager. He's helping out full time this summer. He had been coming in on weekends and after school."

"How well do you know him?" Abe asked.

"Quite well," she said. "He's from a real good family. They've brought their pets to me for years. They go to my church. He's been an honor student. Wants to go to vet school later on. He's a good boy—very gentle with the animals."

She stopped then, sitting there silent with two fingers raised.

"You said there were three?" said Abe.

She nodded and raised a third

finger. "There's Randy, but he couldn't possibly have done it."

"Randy?" said Abe.

"Dr. Randall Wayne," she said. "You've met him, Joe."

Owens wrinkled his forehead and rolled his eyes up like he was studying his eyebrows.

"No," he said after a moment. "I don't think so."

"After the last board meeting," she said. "He came by to take me to dinner. I had him come in and meet everybody. He's a tall very nice-looking young man."

Joe shook his head. "I slipped out a little early last meeting. I didn't know you had a new partner."

"We'll he's not exactly a partner—not yet." She sort of squirmed in her chair when she said "not yet." I thought maybe she blushed a little.

"He finished vet school six years ago at N. C. State," she went on. "He's been practicing in Georgia, but he had been wanting to come back to North Carolina. He picked up my name from a newsletter when I was president of the association and contacted me to see if I knew of any opportunities around here—anybody who might want a partner."

"And you talked to him about joining you?" Abe said.

"Not right away," she said. "I didn't think I wanted a partner. But we corresponded for a while,

and he finally came up for a visit. I was so impressed with him that I told him I could use somebody part time—so I could have a vet on premises on weekends, let me leave earlier in the evenings. That would give him a way to keep going while he looked for something more longterm. But now it's working out so well I think we might get together on a more permanent basis."

I was sure she blushed when she said that last part.

"How long have you known this Dr. Wayne?" Abe asked.

"Well he's just been up here for two months," she answered. "But we started writing each other and talking on the phone last year. I know him better than people I've known for several years. He couldn't be a killer. He has a hard time when we have to put a dog to sleep."

That part about all of her help being nice to animals didn't impress us too much. We already knew that whoever the slayer was he liked to kill women, not dogs. In fact, he'd gone to a lot of trouble to keep from killing a dog. From what we had all learned in police school, that wasn't too far out of kilter with the common psychology of a serial killer of women. He may be gentle as a shepherd to dogs because they aren't threat-

ening to him and as vicious as a wolf to women because they are.

Dr. Bertram stopped and thought for a moment, then she asked Abe, "Do you want a list of my female employees, too? Maybe that could lead you to some other suspects."

"We'd like one," said Abe. "And we also need some more information on your males. When you get back to the clinic, as soon as you can do it without being noticed check your files for addresses and phone numbers on all three of them and especially their dates of birth so we can check them on the indices in the F.B.I's computers."

"Oh, I can give you all that information now," she said.

She did have to go to the phone book for the house number in the Coleman boy's address, but other than that she rattled off the info on the three guys who worked for her. She had a memory like Abe Stein himself. I was impressed. Abe was, too—I could tell.

Abe asked her a few more questions, like where in Georgia did Dr. Wayne come from. It was Athens. And did all three males have access to the records and the animals? They did.

"How about the drugs?" Abe asked.

"Only Randy should have access to the drugs," the vet said. "But honestly, it wouldn't be

that hard for the others to get at them."

At last he told her, "You need to get back out there and see if you've got any young single women picking up pets this weekend."

"I'll check to be certain," she said. "But I'm all but sure we don't."

She was right, of course. Like I said, she had a memory like Abe Stein. Every pet they were boarding right then belonged to a family, a couple, or a man. Sunday passed, and Monday didn't bring any reports of another murder.

But Monday did bring a new customer to the Southside Veterinary Clinic, a young blonde woman who led in a beagle she wanted to board until the next Sunday. The information on the form she left at the clinic said she would be on vacation all that week in Florida. It also said she lived alone in a townhouse in South Charlotte. The printed sheet she carried out told her she had to pick up the dog by six o'clock on Sunday or else she'd have to leave him until Monday.

She was back by five thirty on Sunday. A little after eight o'clock the phone rang at the townhouse. A man's voice spoke to her and said he was calling from the veterinary clinic. That had to be true, because her number was unlisted. And any-

way, how would anybody else know she'd picked her dog up from there?

The man told her that the dog had been exposed to a rare disease—canine hepatitis. There probably weren't any symptoms yet, but if he didn't get a shot right away, he could die within forty-eight hours.

No, she didn't need to bring the dog in. He was calling from a car phone, and he could be there in five minutes. In just four she heard a knock at her door. The caller rushed in carrying a black leather bag. She knew for sure then that he was from the vet because she had seen him there. The beagle greeted him like an old friend, licking and jumping on him, not barking his big-dog bark as he might have done with a stranger.

"I'll need you to hold him," the man told her.

They laid the dog on the floor between them. The man pulled on rubber surgical gloves. He let the bag fall open. He took out a hypodermic syringe. The dog saw it and struggled against her, but she held him tight.

The man plunged the needle into a rubber-topped medicine bottle and filled the syringe. He popped it quickly into the beagle's hip. The dog's struggling let up almost as soon as the man emptied the syringe. It started to relax.

"Hold him just another minute," the man told her.

She stayed where she was, crouched over the dog. The man's hand thrust into the bag again. When it came back out, it held a long blade of surgical steel. He leaned over her.

"Now," he said, holding the knife against her neck. "Take off your clothes, or I'll cut your throat."

As she reached for her sweat-suit top, a voice behind the man said, "No, you won't. Put down the knife."

Abe Stein had just stepped out of the kitchen, his service revolver pointed straight at the man's chest.

I stepped out of the closet under the stairs with my automatic aimed at the suspect's belly.

The blonde policewoman whipped a derringer out of the top of her sweatsuit, pressed it against her assailant's throat, and said, "Now, sucker, it's your turn to take orders. Lie face down on the floor, spread eagle."

While I searched the suspect, the policewoman read him his rights from a yellow Miranda card. He must have believed that part about the right to remain silent because he never said a word. While I searched and she read, Abe radioed for Billy and the rest of our backup

team to come and get the bad guy.

When they came in, Abe told them to take the subject downtown. He instructed the police-woman to call the assistant D.A. on duty to take the case to the magistrate for papering.

Billy asked, "Ain't we going downtown, Abe?"

"Not just yet," Abe answered. "I promised Kadie I'd let her know what happened as soon as it went down."

By that time he was saying "Kadie" like Doc Owens did. He had started out with Dr. Bertram, but he'd been talking to her every day, some days several times. He said he was trying to keep her propped up, that we were asking her to do a harder thing than any civilian we'd ever used before. Every day she had to see three men, all men she cared a whole lot about, and work with them like everything was normal, when she knew that all of them were murder suspects and she was helping to catch the guilty one. So Abe called her at home every morning and evening, and had her calling him whenever she needed to in between.

As the other officers left for downtown, Abe went on talking about "Kadie."

"She's at Joe's," he said. "I didn't want her to be alone tonight. We're going over there. I don't

think she should have to hear this over the phone."

When we got to Doc Owens' a few minutes later, Abe went straight in the back door to the private office. Both vets were sitting there waiting for us. Dr. Bertram got up and met Abe halfway to the door. Her shoulders were hunched forward, and she had her fists clenched tight, like she was holding herself together.

"It's over," said Abe. "We've caught the slayer."

"Was it—" She hesitated like she thought not asking the question could keep the answer from being true.

Then she pressed her arms against her sides, took a breath, and started over. "Was it Randy?"

Abe didn't say anything. He nodded his head just the least bit. She fell against him. Abe caught her in his arms. For several seconds she trembled against his chest, like Marlene Shook's little dog had done the week before.

We had all known she'd take it hard. We'd been dreading it, Abe and Billy and me. We had known for days it was pretty damned sure to be Randy Wayne. Police sources in Georgia had turned up four unsolved killings of young women in Athens that fit our pattern during the years he'd been practic-

ing there. But of course we hadn't burdened her with that until we had to, and now that we had, it looked like maybe she was taking it as hard as we'd been afraid she would.

"Oh, Abe," she sobbed. "If I hadn't trusted him so. But he was so good to me. And I've never had anybody before. I've always just had my work."

All that last part sounded a lot like the fellow who was holding her while she was saying it.

She was sobbing so hard she couldn't get her breath. I was afraid she really was going to faint, and hoping that Joe Owens knew something about doctoring humans. Then she pushed up her shoulders, like a weight lifter putting a heavy bar back on the rack, stepped away from Abe, and clenched her fists again.

Damn, that woman's strong, I thought.

"Tell me what happened," she said.

Abe motioned to a chair, and him and Doc and K. D. sat down. Me and Billy kind of leaned against the wall. Abe was sitting on a kind of a settee or loveseat or something that was made for two people. But it was small enough and me and Billy are both wide enough that if either one of us had sat down he'd have been closer to Abe

than one male cop wants to sit next to another one.

Abe went over everything that had happened that night.

K. D. sat there and listened, dry-eyed, muscles all tight, like she was holding a door closed that somebody was trying to push in.

I never saw another tear or a tremble until Abe got to the very end. Then her lips quivered, and she said again, "If I hadn't trusted him, those girls might still be alive."

I hadn't said anything much up until then, but at that I felt like I had to.

"Dr. Bertram," I said, "If anybody needs to feel guilty, it ain't you, it's me and Billy. If we had picked up the clues the first time, instead of its having to wait until Abe got back to see them, Marlene Shook might not have died."

Abe said, "I did have more to go on than you did. I had both killings."

"We had both of them for three whole days before you got back from vacation," I said. "And anyway, you would have noticed the kennel receipt being missing on the first one."

"Is that what first started you looking toward a veterinary suspect?" K. D. asked. "The receipts not being there?"

Abe shook his head. "No," he

said. "That wasn't the first thing."

That was news to me. So me and Billy really listened up then. Of course we always did when Abe was talking about homicide investigation. It's kind of like having Arnold Palmer tell you how he corrected a slice.

"The first thing I learned from Sherlock Holmes," Abe said. "Usually old detective stories don't have anything to do with real-life investigation, but one of them did. There's one of them where the first clue Holmes came up with was a dog that didn't bark when he would have expected it to. In this case what the dogs didn't do told me an awful lot. Not only did they not bark, they didn't seem to do anything while somebody was killing their owners. Both times there were neighbors all around, and they didn't hear those dogs doing anything.

"So I decided first that had to mean whoever came in was somebody the dog knew, both times. Then you've got the dog doing nothing when the owners were killed, but being unhurt and running around loose when the bodies were found. That made me think the killer knew how to neutralize the dog without hurting it. I wouldn't know how to do that, and neither would most people. So I thought it had to be somebody who knew

an uncommon lot about dogs. I thought of vets. I thought I'd check where the dead women had been boarding their dogs while they were gone away. I looked for the receipts. When we couldn't find them, that made me think the killer had found them ahead of us.

"Why would he take them? Only one possible reason. Those receipts would lead us to him. That's when I started looking for kennel bills. It was the dogs that didn't bark, together with the clues we didn't find, that led us to your clinic."

K. D. asked a very natural question. "What becomes of the little dogs now?"

I had part of the answer. "Diane Ray's parents came and got her little cocker. But Marlene Shook's parents are in a retirement home where they can't have pets. They asked us to find the little thing a good home. It's still here at Joe's. Abe won't let us take it back to the county. He thinks them big old security dogs scare it."

K. D. looked at Doc Owens. "How's the little Lhasa doing, Joe?" she asked.

"Not real good," said Doc. "Kind of moping around. She's been through a lot. Needs more love than I've had time to give her. You want to see her?"

K. D. said she did, and Doc went out through a steel door to

the kennel area. We could hear a bunch of dogs yipping and yapping as he walked back there among them. When he came back into the office and shut the door, it muffled all of the animal sounds except for some whimpers coming from the silky little bundle he was carrying in one hand and petting with the other.

Doc started toward the chair where K. D. was sitting, but the little dog saw Abe and quit whimpering. It started wagging its tail and yapping and pushing its legs against Doc's arm, trying to get to Abe.

Doc stepped over and put the little mutt in Abe's lap. It went crazy, licking him in the face and bouncing around on his knees. K. D. scooted over and sat down next to Abe on the settee. They were both rubbing on the dog and playing with it, and both of them were laughing. That got me to thinking how seldom you heard Abe laugh, or really saw him having any fun, other than the pleasure he got out of solving murder cases.

While I was thinking about Abe, Doc Owens was thinking about the dog. "That's the first time I've seen her do anything but mope since the time Abe came in to see her last Wednesday," he said.

That was the first I had heard of Abe visiting the dog, or anybody else much for that matter.

Heck, he never came to see me when I had my gall bladder out.

K. D. looked around among Abe and Billy and me. "Can't one of you give her a home?" she asked.

Billy said, "Not me. Them kids of mine got a fat old boxer. She's a sweet dog, but she's jealous, and she's not about to let another dog in the place."

"Me either," said I. "My wife's got these two cats that don't need a dog in their lives."

She turned to the man sitting next to her. By that time she was kind of leaning out across his lap to love the little dog. His arm was resting on the back of the settee behind her. So she was looking right into his eyes when she said, "Do you have any family pets?"

"No," said Abe. "I don't even have any family."

"She's yours then," said K. D.

Doc Owens said, "Yeah, Abe, she's crazy about you already."

Abe said, "I don't know anything about taking care of a dog."

"That's all right," said K. D. "I'll teach you."

Doc Owens said again, "She's crazy about you already, Abe. And you can give her the attention she needs after all she's just been through."

I sort of wondered if Doc was still talking about the dog.

K. D. said, "If you would trust

me to, I'd keep her for you whenever you have to go out of town."

Billy put in, "Abe ain't out of town all that much. That trip to Jerusalem is the first vacation he's took since I've known him."

K. D. said, "You didn't tell me you had just been to Jerusalem."

Abe said, "Nobody's interested in my vacation trip."

"I am," said K. D. "I'd love to hear about everything you did in Jerusalem."

She was still bent over Abe's lap. She was scratching the dog's nose with one hand and kind of bracing herself on Abe's thigh with the other. Abe had one hand on the dog, too, but the one that had been on the back of the settee was on the back of the woman by that time. Being as they were so close together, when she said she wanted to hear about his trip, she dropped her voice so low that the rest of us just could hear it.

Ol' Billy piped up and said, "We'd like to hear about your trip, too, Abe."

So I said, "Billy, we can hear about Abe's trip any old time. Right now, me and you better get down to the station and make sure them young cops are getting all that paperwork done right."

I looked over to the loveseat. "K. D.," I said—I still couldn't get it to come out "Kadie." "Would you mind driving Abe and his little doggie home? He

wouldn't be supposed to use a police car to haul his personal dog in, and we wouldn't want ol' Abe to get in trouble."

Billy said, "Are you kidding? Abe wouldn't get in trouble if he hauled an elephant in a squad car."

I kind of pushed Billy toward the door and said, "Abe, we won't need you tonight. Y'all just get your new dog settled in, and we'll see you tomorrow sometime."

I felt better about myself. I may not be as smart as Abe, but I ain't as dumb as ol' Billy is.

Neither is Doc Owens. He said, "Wait a minute, boys. I'll go on out with you. Kadie, I'll just set the night latch, and you and Abe pull the door to as you leave. It'll lock."

As Doc was fiddling with the door, I heard K. D. say to Abe, "Now tell me all about Jerusalem."

Abe said, "I really wasn't in Jerusalem as long as I meant to be. The first day I was in Israel I went by the Tel Aviv police department, just as a kind of courtesy call. While I was there, a call came in about a farmer's being found murdered in his olive grove, and it took us over a week to get that straightened out. So I just had a couple of days to spend in Jerusalem."

Like I said, Abe Stein is a homicide detective. □

FICTION



OUR LITTLE SECRET

Michael Horenkamp

Illustration by Jason C. Eckhardt

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 9/96

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O kay, like, Larry, the New York Director, better known as the New York Dork, goes into props storage and finds this phony pistol, a big semiautomatic we used earlier in a mystery play. That night he sets it on a stool next to the chair where he sits when he gives notes after rehearsal. Everybody glances at it, then turns away in, you know, dread.

For his first note Larry talks to Pam, who has the ingenue role.

"Pamela, dear, I have never seen an actress do a part so utterly free of any emotional spark. Maybe you should do it nude. If the audience is gasping over those lovely charms of yours, at least they won't be listening to you. As it is now . . ."

He picks up the gun, holds it to his temple, pretends to fire, making this *kksshhhing!* sound and jerking his head like he's shot himself. The rest of us get the same routine—actors, technical crew, stagehands—everybody. We're all driving him to suicide. Hmph!

Pam comes to me for aspirin, which I keep in my backpack. That's like a second job Fran has given me. Make sure Pam gets her fix.

Larry does his gun routine the next night and tries it again the night after that. But like they say, the third time's the charm.

This gun is real. It fires. Gag, what a mess! Larry's body and what's left of his head are on the floor. His brain is offstage-left in pieces, and the rest of us are sprayed with blood. Good thing nobody was in costume yet.

Me, I'm off to the ladies' room where I hang my head over the first commode and hurl everything since lunchtime last Christmas. Then I go fetal on the tiles and can't move. The police come, look around, an officer finds me, and they put me on the couch in Fran's office. Fran calls Mom and Dad, who come rushing in and do a lot of kissing and crying and hugging, which is so embarrassing that I sort of come around. Then the police say they'd like to talk to me later to find out whether I saw anything but for now I can go home. They still don't know who made the switch.

I do.

This is not at all excellent because that person is someone I really, really like. The other bad thing is that I am an accomplice, sort of. But what really ticks me off is that I didn't want any part of all this in the first place. Mom and Dad said they were worried because I was so, like, "withdrawn" and that they thought it would be a good idea for me to audition at the Little Players, this amateur theater group in our town.



That's Los Parentos for you! I mean, roll my eyes!

So, under duress, I attend auditions. Surprise! I go up on stage and everybody is so impressed with my talent, poise, charm, and charisma that I get the leading female role—not!

But I do meet Fran. She sees me moping around and sits down and talks to me. I tell her how I don't want to act, but, like, you know, parents and all that. She says maybe I could work with her in props, which are the things—like a scarf, or a pen, or a gun, that kind of stuff—that actors use on stage. She is so nice that I say okay.

Then it turns out Fran is president of the theater group but not stuck up or bossy at all. She takes care of a lot of dull stuff like maintenance and bookkeeping. When the plays are on, she's a stagehand or works on things like props. Everybody says she knows a lot about theater, could be a director easy, but she just likes to stay in the background.

I also get to know Pam and Joe, two of the actors. Pam I told you about, the ingenue aspirin junkie. Joe plays her father. I like Pam, who is nice as can be, but Joe and I hit it off really great. In a few days, we're doing these really dumb song-and-dance routines and fake fights and stuff together. They must be

really something to see. Joe is tall and goodlooking but super old, like in his fifties. He's still really spry, though. His hair is gray, and his face is neat, all sort of lined and craggy. So, there's Joe and runty little me with my red hair stabbing out from under my baseball cap, my glasses bouncing on my nose, and my pack bobbing on my back. And we're always doing some crazy routine. Joe gets a big kick out of my backpack, which I'm never without, and he starts calling me that, "Backpack." Pretty soon that's what everybody calls me.

Fran just shakes her head at Joe and me. It becomes sort of a three-way improv, her egging us on with this mock disapproval. "What are you two delinquents up to now?" Fran says. And Joe or I look smug and say, "Oh, that's our little secret." It's just the fun-o-rama arcade. Mom and Dad say I'm less "withdrawn," so they're happy, too.

Yep, everything would be perfect except for Larry.

At first Fran was really excited about Larry, him being from the Big Apple and all. What she had done was advertise in a theater magazine, which got her a whole slough of resumes and Larry's seemed like the most impressive so she picked him. Well, I love Fran, but no-

body's perfect. I mean she could not have made a worse choice.

For one thing, Larry can't say a word without insulting somebody. Like the actors are doing a scene and somebody does something he doesn't like? What does he say?

"Look, if you can't do it any better than that, we might as well just give up. That's just bad acting, it's bad acting."

Besides that, Larry is a terrible director. Instead of telling actors where to go in a scene, what to do, how to say a line, he just talks trash, all this intellectual, theoretical junk that nobody understands. Then he acts like everybody's stupid because they don't know what to do.

So we're three weeks into rehearsal and three weeks from performance and going nowhere. Most of the actors just sort of grumble and go along, but Pam is truly scared to death of Larry. The thing is, even though he's skinny and probably just about anybody could kick his butt, he's sort of tall and imposing and he has these dark eyes, which, I have to admit, are intimidating. So Pam is a wreck. She can never remember lines, or where she's supposed to move on stage, and the more unsure she grows, the more mean and sarcastic Larry gets. That's when Fran notices that Pam is always asking whether anybody

has some aspirin, and I am named her dealer.

Fran tries to talk to Larry, saying how our group is pretty conventional and sticks to traditional theater methods and that usually the directors try to nurture and encourage the actors rather than be so critical. She really tries to be nice.

"Look," Larry replies, "am I the director here or not? Does the artist get a little creative freedom around this place, or do I just have to bow to the whim of a bunch of provincials?" The whole conversation goes nowhere.

Well, Joe and I go to see Fran in her office afterwards, and it looks like she's been crying. Fran is kind of, well, fat, and her face is, oh, jowly, with mottled skin and pouches around her eyes. With what the tears do, she looks pretty bad. But when she sees us, she scrunches her features into a smile, which turns her eyes into little black slits.

"Joe, Backpack," she says, "what are you delinquents up to?"

"Oh, that's our little secret," Joe says, and we all laugh.

Then Joe says, "Look, Fran, you've got to get rid of that guy. He's a jerk. He doesn't know what he's doing. He's ruining our play."

"I can't," Fran says. "There's a



contract. As long as he's been here now, he gets the whole fee even if he's let go. We don't have any money to hire somebody else. And what about the board? They approved hiring him. How do I explain to them?"

"The board would understand," I say. "Everybody in the company would back you up."

"Besides," Joe says, "this is your time, kiddo, your opportunity. You could direct and really pull this thing out. Do it."

"No, no," Fran says, and her jowls tremble. "I can't do that. I can't. Come on, you guys, stick with me. Maybe things'll get better."

That's the night Larry starts the routine with the gun.

The next night, during rehearsal, Pam and Joe are working on a scene on stage while Larry is watching from the audience. Pam is stumbling and struggling along when Larry screams at the top of his voice:

"No, no, no, no, no, my God, can't you do *anything* right?" And he comes rushing up on stage. "I wish, Pamela, that you could just do as you're told when it comes to blocking. First you go here, then you go here, then . . ." And he's yanking her around the stage like she's a rag doll. None of the rest of us can say anything, but Joe does.

He very firmly unwedges Pam

from Larry's grasp and confronts our New York Director.

"Look, Larry," Joe says, "I know you're a very intense guy, and you want things a certain way, but you can't manhandle Pam, okay? Maybe she'll let you, but I won't."

Oh, Holy Ad-Lib, Batman, what a performance! I mean Joe speaks with this quiet dignity, and still so firm. He's wonderful.

"You are dismissed," Larry says.

"I beg your pardon," Joe replies.

"You're fired, booted, history," Larry tells him. "Get out of my theater."

Joe looks like he might say something but just shakes his head, sighs, drops his script on a chair, turns, and hops down off the stage. Pam runs into the wings with her face in her hands. I get some aspirin ready.

Fran runs to intercept Joe, but he raises his hand, palm out, to stop her.

"Don't, Fran," he says, "I'm just as glad to be out of it." And he walks out.

Fran looks up at Larry on stage.

"How are we going to replace him?" she asks.

"Easily," he replies. "I'll play the role."

Nobody says a word. Larry



does his gun routine again at the end of the night.

The next night, before rehearsal, I go to Joe's apartment to see how he's doing.

He smiles really big when he opens the door.

"Hey, Backpack, how're you doing? Come on in."

I say fine and I ask how he is and he says okay, and then he grins like he does when he's flashing on something really funky for us to goof on.

He shows me this gun. It looks a whole lot like the one Larry is freaking everybody with.

"Where'd you get that?" I ask.

"I bought it, for protection, I suppose," Joe says, "maybe ten years ago at a gun fair down South. I brought it home, put it away, never even thought about it much until Larry started doing his thing. What's great is, there's no record on it or anything. I got it before all the gun control stuff kicked in."

"What are you going to do with it?" I ask.

"Switch it with Larry's implement of torture," Joe says. "When he picks up this one and fires, *boom!* Our New York Director goes for the final blackout."

I can feel my eyes widening. "Are you really going to do it?"

He gives me this totally dark look, and I kind of cringe. Then he smiles.

"No," he says, "I'm not. I thought about it—has that clown pushed my buttons or what?—but I'm just talking nonsense to get it out of my system." Then he grins really big and says, "That's our little secret," and we do one of our goofing routines, punching at each other and mugging.

His phone rings, he puts the gun in a drawer and goes to see who's calling. I say I'm going and he calls back okay and I head for the door. But I steal over to the drawer, open it, pick up the pistol, and put it in my backpack.

When I get to the theater, my legs start quivering. A few people greet me, and my voice breaks when I answer. I think everybody is looking at me funny. I go to the prop room and find Larry's fake gun on the shelf. I put the real one next to it and look at them for at least a minute.

Joe appears in the doorway.

"My God, Backpack," he says, "what are you doing?" He sees the two guns. "I knew it," he says. "As soon as I got off the phone, I knew. I checked the drawer, thank God. I must have driven over here seventy miles an hour the whole way. Kid, have you lost your mind?"

I snap the gun back into my pack. Joe reaches for me, and I back away.



"Give it to me," he says.

"What are you delinquents up to?" Fran is standing in the doorway now, looking at us.

"Oh," Joe says, and I chime in, "that's our little secret."

Then Larry shows up behind Fran. "I just want my . . ." and then he sees Joe. "What's he doing here? What are you doing here? I fired you and I meant it. Now get out."

Joe, just as cool as can be, says, "Fran asked me to help her with props."

So Larry turns on Fran. "Either you get him out of here or I go. Which is it?"

Fran, for the first time that I've ever seen, shows some real fire.

"It's neither," she snaps. "You don't tell me who handles props. I need the help, and Joe has been kind enough to volunteer in spite of how you treated him. And don't threaten me, buster. That contract obligates you as well as me."

Larry backs up, really, like two or three steps, then recovers. "I came to get my gun," he says and picks it up and leaves.

Joe lets out a deep breath. "Thanks for backing me up, kid-do," he says to Fran.

"Wow, Fran," I say, "really sharp there with Mr. Jerkhead."

Fran eyes us both rather sourly.

"You want to work on props like you said?" she asks Joe.

"Sure," he says.

"Good. I can use the help. You'll both be busy," Fran says. "Let's get started."

As we follow Fran, Joe mouths words and shakes his finger at me. He wants the gun back right after rehearsal. I nod meekly.

I sit at my regular place in the seats near Fran, and at first I keep my pack on because of the gun. It's uncomfortable, though, and I think people are looking at me. Usually I take the pack off and slip it under the chair. So, in order to avoid suspicion, I do that. Nobody has ever bothered it before, I reason.

Fran has Joe and me running hard to keep up with all the things she wants done. That's fine. I don't have time to think about what I almost did. When I do think about it, I tremble.

Then the rehearsal is over. It's the third night—and Larry takes his trip to Splatterville.

I stay home for three nights after that. The cops come, but I'm too scared to say anything and they think I'm still "traumatized," which I guess I am. They leave after a while and say they don't think they'll need to talk to me again. Dad tells Mom he's read in the paper where the police say the only



fingerprints on both guns are Larry's, and they can't trace the real one.

I can't make up my mind whether I'm glad to hear that or not. I mean, Joe is my best friend in the whole world, but it had to be him who fished his pistol out of my pack while I was off on some errand for Fran. Then he must have made the switch in all the confusion that comes during rehearsal or afterwards. Unless I picked up the wrong gun. But I know I put the real gun back in my pack. I know it. I have to talk to Joe.

The next night I tell Mom and Dad I'm going back to the theater. They say no, but I say, please, I made a commitment, and they like that and get all misty-eyed. Our little girl is growing up, they say.

When I get to the theater, the first person I meet is Pam, who says how glad she is to see me, but that's not what is really on her mind. "Fran's director now," she says. "She finally did it, and she's wonderful. The show's going to be great."

I just look at her and can't say anything. I feel numb. "Are you okay?" she asks.

"No—yeah, I'm fine," I say. "I guess you won't be needing so many aspirin now." She laughs.

Then Joe appears. "Hello, Backpack," he says quietly, like

he's scared. Pam stares because that is not how Joe talks to me. Joe and I look at each other.

"Well," Pam says, "I have to work with one of the guys on a scene before rehearsal starts. 'Scuse me." She hurries away.

Joe looks around. "This way," he says, and we go into Fran's office.

"My God, Backpack," Joe says, "how could you do that? You've committed a murder."

"I didn't do it," I say, "you did it."

"What are you talking about?"

We are shouting at each other in whispers. The door opens.

"Backpack," Fran says, "you're back. Oh, it's good to see you, honey," and she hugs me. I'm not very responsive, and she looks at me, then at Joe, who stands with his hands in his pockets and his eyes on the floor.

"Well," Fran says, "what are you delinquents up to?"

Joe can't manage a response.

"Joe killed Larry," I blurt out.

"No," Joe cries, "it's not true."

I tell Fran everything, and Joe and I trade accusations.

Fran is silent for several moments. "You know what," she finally says. "I love being a director. All these years I was afraid to do it. Finally I had the guts to do it, and I'm good at it and I love it."



"Aw, no," Joe says. "Fran, you did it . . ."

"No," she says. "Neither did either of you."

Joe and I stare.

"During rehearsal Pam wanted aspirin, and you weren't around," Fran says, nodding at me. "So I told her to get them from your pack. Nobody else went near it."

"What do we tell the police?" Joe says.

"Nothing," Fran replies. "We can't prove a thing. And how long will you two hold up when the police start asking questions? They'll learn it was your gun, Joe, and Backpack brought it in. They might not believe what I say about Pam because they'll learn I'm such good bud-

dies with you guys. They could probably nail the both of you for conspiracy, if nothing else. What's the point?"

"I don't know . . ." Joe says.

Fran motions us to follow, and we leave the office to stand in the back of the theater. On stage, working on a scene with another actor, is Pam. She is glowing. Her voice brims with feeling, and when she moves, it's so graceful, like a ballerina, like fluid.

"I need her in this play," Fran says.

"But she's a murderer," Joe protests.

Fran grins, and there are only black slits between the pouches of fat around her eyes.

"That's our little secret," she says.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

THE TREGANNET BOOK OF HOURS A. N. L. Munby



Many artists have tried to depict the supernatural, usually with a singular lack of success. To me the average picture of the ghost in Hamlet in an illustrated Shakespeare suggests nothing more sinister than a game of charades. A few artists do seem to envisage what a man *ought* to feel when he sees a ghost and try to produce that effect on the spectator. Fuseli achieved some slight measure of success; Goya a great deal. The latter, I feel, really had experienced what he depicts. But on the whole ghosts seem carefully to avoid appearing to anyone capable of putting down on paper exactly what he saw. Which makes me all the more sorry that I did not see before its destruction what must have been a very remarkable miniature.

Some time ago I bought at a sale an illuminated manuscript—a Book of Hours. It was of the normal late-medieval pattern—a Calendar of Saints, the devotions for the Canonical Hours, and the order of service for baptisms and burials. The illustrations were the usual complement of twelve miniatures containing scenes from the life of Christ. The book was written on fine white vellum, and the binding was of old red velvet.

Such was the fifteenth-century manuscript that I bought in a moment of reckless extravagance. And lest it should be supposed that I am a collector of the caliber of Pierpont Morgan or Richard Heber, I hasten to add that it was a very modest Book of Hours indeed, such as would have found no shelf room in the cabinet of a Duc de Berry. Its decoration and miniatures were of a kind that experts disdainfully dismiss as “shop work.” It was, in fact, produced in Flanders for the English market about 1480, and though competently written and illuminated, it was no great work of art. Nevertheless, I was inordinately proud of it, for it was the only illuminated manuscript that I owned.

A friend of mine dined with me soon after. He works in the Department of Manuscripts at the British Museum. After dinner I said to him with feigned nonchalance: “By the way, I picked up a nice little Book of Hours the other day,” and handed him my treasure. He examined it with the greatest care leaf by leaf and then said:

“What a pity that the miniature illustrating the Burial Service is a modern copy!”

To say that I was mortified is putting it mildly. I looked at the miniature in question carefully. Like nineteen out of twenty minia-

From The Alabaster Hand by A. N. L. Munby, copyright 1949. Reprinted by permission.

tures illustrating the Burial Service, it depicted the Raising of Lazarus. My friend was, of course, correct. Although the style was extremely close to that of the other miniatures, minute inspection with a glass revealed the fact that it was of modern workmanship, and that it had been inserted by pasting it to the stub of a leaf which had been cut out.

My friend tried to salve my wounded vanity.

"It's an extraordinarily good copy," he said. "I think there's only one man alive today who can produce that sort of work. I wouldn't mind betting that an old man named Clarkson painted that miniature. If I hadn't already seen some of his work at the museum, it would have completely taken me in."

"Is he a forger?" I asked.

"He'd be most offended if you called him that," he replied. "He is a most accomplished illustrator, and his main work is Rolls of Honour, Addresses, and the like. But he will also undertake commissions for the reproduction of medieval manuscripts, and a very good job he makes of them!"

I agreed ruefully. After my friend had gone I reexamined the book but could discover no other peculiarities except for one small point. A shield on the first leaf had apparently once contained a coat of arms, but the arms emblazoned there had been carefully erased, and by the whiteness of the vellum below I thought that this must have been done at no very remote date.

I thought little more of the matter at the time and was still very proud of my possession. After all, one leaf only out of nearly a hundred was not genuine, and like a man who is unwilling to face an unpleasant truth, I used to turn hastily past that leaf when I displayed the book to visitors in future.

No ephemeral literature approaches in fascination a bookseller's catalogue. To receive one at the breakfast table, skim through it with one's bacon and eggs, send off a postcard by the first mail for some long-lost rarity—or even a telegram if circumstances demand it—these are among the highest pleasures of life. Nor can I bring myself to throw away a catalogue when it is out of date until a mountainous accumulation of them demands some drastic action. Then—perhaps once in three years—there is a gigantic sorting; some are earmarked to be retained permanently as works of reference; the rest are reluctantly destroyed after any item of particular interest has been cut out and transferred to a scrapbook.

It is my custom to browse among my old catalogues, and it was in this way that I hit upon a description of my manuscript. I was looking through a bound volume of old catalogues of the house of Leighton, a great firm in the early years of the century but now extinct. Listed there was undoubtedly my Book of Hours; from the description of the decoration, the miniatures, and the binding it could be none other. There were, however, two points of difference. In the first place the coat of arms at the beginning had been intact in 1904, the date of the catalogue. Unfortunately it was merely described as "an unidentified coat of arms," but it had not been erased. The second difference was more striking—I will quote from the printed description:

"Eleven of the twelve miniatures are well-executed examples of fifteenth century Flemish illumination, but the twelfth, illustrating the Burial Service, is by another hand. It is a crude but vivid drawing in pen and ink of a church interior. In the foreground two figures are assisting in the Raising of Lazarus, watched by a seated figure in one of the pews; a fourth figure, apparently a priest, is depicted as running through the door of the church. It is difficult to account for this variation from the normal representation of the scene, which is apparently nearly contemporary with the rest of the manuscript."

Here was a very curious problem. Why should anyone in the last twenty years have destroyed this miniature and substituted a modern imitation of the orthodox version of the Raising of Lazarus? Why, too, should anyone have erased the arms? I was sufficiently interested to attempt to find the answer to this puzzle.

I first tried to trace the previous owner. At the sale in which I bought it, the book had been described as "The Property of a Gentleman," and the auctioneers would not, naturally, disclose the identity of their client. Next I got the address of Clarkson, the illuminator, from my friend at the museum and went to see him. He recognized the book and admitted the authorship of the modern miniature. The one which it had replaced had already been cut out when he received the volume, and the arms had been erased. I asked him for the name of the man who had commissioned the work, and after some hesitation he gave it to me. It was that of a Cornish antiquary with some of whose published work I was familiar. I wrote to him, telling him what I already knew of the circumstances and asking him if he would be kind enough to satisfy my

curiosity in the matter. I received a rebuff—I will quote from his letter:

“You are correct in your deduction that I was the previous owner of the Book of Hours in your possession, and that I destroyed the miniature and had another one substituted. I am fully aware that such an act must appear to you to be a piece of wanton vandalism; nevertheless I am not prepared to defend it or even to discuss it. Let it suffice that my reasons to my own mind were entirely adequate and that my own conscience is clear on the matter. . . .”

There seemed to be nothing more that I could do. It was extremely irksome to have an unexplained mystery on my shelves, but I could not force the man to tell me about it, and presumably he had some good reason for his reticence.

About a year ago he died, and I received from his executors a sealed envelope bearing my name in his handwriting. It contained several closely written sheets of foolscap and a covering letter:

“Dear Mr.—, I have decided that after all you should know the story connected with your Book of Hours. I purchased it in 1904 from the firm of Leighton and was intrigued by the extraordinary miniature illustrating the Burial Service. I succeeded in discovering what lay behind it, and I wish to God that I had never done so. Since that day I have never seen the book without a shudder—funerals have filled me with an unreasoning dread and the thought of my own with a mortal terror. It was for my own peace of mind that I destroyed the miniature, and I obliterated the arms which gave me the clue to the story. They were the arms of Prior Ralph Tregannet, the last prior of the small Benedictine Priory of St. Fagan, near Fowey in Cornwall, which was dissolved in 1536. I discovered the monastic records of this priory among some of the archives of the great Benedictine house of Milton Abbey in Dorset, now in a private collection. Amongst them were certain papers of the last prior from which I was able to reconstruct the story which I give below. When you have read it, you will perhaps understand how powerfully the miniature worked on my imagination, and will blame me less for the destruction of an eyewitness’s picture of a scene of unexampled horror”

You can imagine with what interest I picked up the foolscap sheet and started to read.

“The ancient family of Tregannet were Lords of the Manor of St.

Deniol in Cornwall from time immemorial until the beginning of the eighteenth century, when the line became extinct. The present manor house, which I have visited, dates from the early seventeenth century, but it is built on the foundations of a very much earlier structure. In the turbulent history of the county the name of Tregannet is ever to the fore, and Hector Tregannet, born in 1452, was no exception. Like so many West Country gentlemen he was an active Lancastrian and fought as a young man at Tewkesbury. In the rising of 1497, though a man of forty-five, he was one of the hot-heads who, having marched the whole length of southern England, met their defeat at Deptford Strand. Here Tregannet received the King's Pardon and returned to his estates. But this firebrand did not confine himself to disturbing the peace of his king; he was likewise a scourge to his neighbors. Like so many of his fellow Cornishmen, he turned his hand to piracy, and the curious can find in the Patent Rolls an account of his depredations from Fowey upon the shipping of the Breton ports. Tregannet was, in short, just such a man as one would expect to flourish in the absence of a strong government, an opportunist who made the most of a period of feudal anarchy and social unrest. His son, the prior, might be expected to put forward his better qualities, yet even in his son's narrative he appears as a reckless, overbearing man who would stop short of no crime to achieve his ends—not even murder.

"The Tregannet lands were fairly extensive and included a rugged stretch of coast between St. Austell and Fowey. To the east were the church lands of the Priory of St. Fagan, and in the priory church were the tombs of past generations of Tregannets. To the north lay the small estate of a yeoman farmer named Thomas Prest. Between the families of Prest and Tregannet there was a feud, the origins of which went back to some boundary dispute of remote antiquity. Thomas Prest appears to have been an upright, resolute man who refused to be intimidated by his more powerful neighbor. He would seem to have acted with great moderation under considerable provocation, for on several occasions his cattle had been driven off and his servants assaulted, and in those times of civil war it was hard to obtain any legal redress. His estate, though not large, was a good one, and Hector Tregannet had for many years cast covetous eyes upon it. In the year 1502 he succeeded in incorporating it within the Manor of St. Deniol by methods of peculiar ruthlessness. The prior's narrative is slightly ambiguous, but there is little doubt that he circulated in the surrounding country-

side dark stories of witchcraft, which finally so inflamed the minds of the superstitious peasantry that one night they went in a body to Prest's house and fired it. Tregannet himself watched the outrage with every sign of satisfaction. Prest and his wife—they were childless—were trapped in an upper room, but the crowd made no attempt to rescue them. As they stood round the blazing building, the smoke cleared for a moment, and the form of Thomas Prest could be seen at the window. He recognized Tregannet below, and after calling upon God to bear witness to his innocence, he set a curse upon his enemy, "that he would never be buried with his forefathers in the Priory Church of St. Fagan." The smoke eddied up again, and he was seen no more. Both he and his wife perished in the gutted building, and in default of an heir his lands were seized by the Tregannets.

"The conscience of Hector Tregannet did not, however, rest easy. He could not forget the curse put upon him by the neighbor whom he had wronged. He went abroad less than he had done and abandoned his piratical enterprises, for he was resolved to die in his bed and find his last resting-place with his forefathers.

"In 1510 he died. At his deathbed his two sons swore that they would bury him in the Priory Church—he thought that he had cheated the curse.

"The day of the funeral was hot and airless, and the sky overcast. An oppressive atmosphere of expectation lay like a pall over the countryside. The coffin of Hector Tregannet was slowly carried from his house into the Priory Church and set down before the choir steps. The nave was full of the dead man's tenants, and in the choir were the ten monks of the establishment and six of the lay brothers. As the voice of the officiating priest chanted the burial service, the heat became more and more stifling and the interior of the church became darker. Just as he reached the words *Memento, homo, quia pulvis es et in pulverem reverteris*, there was a sudden vivid flash of lightning and a single clap of thunder right overhead. The congregation was half blinded by the flash, but when their eyes were accustomed to the gloom once more, they saw two figures standing on the choir steps, one on each side of the coffin. And as one man the congregation and the monks rose and ran headlong from the church, even the priest who had been reading the service. And as they ran, torrential rain began to fall with a continuous roaring sound. But the younger son of the dead man did not run away because he was lame. He tried to avert his eyes from the two

figures on the choir steps, but he could not. And he saw that they were blind, for their faces were charred and shapeless, and the arms with which they groped and fumbled at the coffin ended in blackened stumps.

"He must have fainted, for he remembered no more until he found two monks bending over him. Several hours had passed before any of them had found the courage to return. Of the figures there was no sign and the coffin was empty. The body of Hector Tregannet was never seen again by human eye.

"The younger son devoted the rest of his days to the service of God; he entered the Benedictine Order and eventually became the last prior of St. Fagan's. He gave the estate of Thomas Prest to the Church. And as an act of penance for his father's sins, to keep ever fresh in his mind the dangers of incurring the Divine Wrath, he set down on vellum the scene in the Priory Church and substituted it for the Flemish miniature of the Raising of Lazarus in his Book of Hours."

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



If you like a dash of contemporary romance with your suspense, pick up Laura Van Wormer's **Jury Duty** (Crown, \$24). Novelist Libby Winslow dutifully reports to lower Manhattan for jury duty and soon finds herself one of sixteen citizens selected to serve on a murder case. It turns out to be a trial already touted by the tabloids as the "Poor Little Rich Boy" and involves a wealthy and allegedly obsessed playboy, a brutally murdered model, and other elements sure to please a crowd. Van Wormer concerns herself here with Libby's day-to-day experiences, the forced intimacy of jurors prohibited from reading newspapers, watching TV, or talking about the case with friends and family. Libby, who is single and successful, soon attracts the attention of two of the male jurors. As she finds out, however, this tightly knit group of people are still strangers to one another. And in an eerie mirror image of the case that Libby and her fellow jurists are hearing daily, one of these friendly strangers has all the makings of a psychopathic stalker.

Marian Babson's two delightful silver screen stars have returned in **Even Yuppies Die** (St. Martin's, \$20.95). Trixie Dolan and Evangeline Sinclair have been offered a London flat by their good friends; the grandson is supposed to take care of arrangements. Well, he does, putting them up in the penthouse of his own half-restored dockside building in a seedy neighborhood in the weak hope that their glamorous presence will attract buyers—in a dying real estate market, no less. But then the tenants begin dying, too. It's a fresh setting surrounded by little pearls of wit, and the two elderly ladies sparkle at its center, making this a slim gem of a book.

For adventure-minded readers, Bob Reiss gives us **Purgatory Road** (Simon & Schuster, \$22), a hot thriller set in a very, very cold

climate. Jack Amirault and his sister are scientists at a U.S. research base in Antarctica. Jack has just returned from a year off base: he was recovering from a breakdown he suffered after watching his best friend plummet to his death in an icy and bottomless crevasse while trying to rescue Robyn Cassidy, a celebrity environmental activist. Robyn Cassidy, too, is back. When Jack's sister dies in a freak accident, it's all too easy to put down his growing fears as paranoia, a recurrence of his breakdown. But someone is behind the outbreak of deadly "accidents" that begin to plague the base, and only Cassidy is willing to help Jack get to the bottom of it. The deadly milieu of the novel—the killing cold, man-eating seals, treacherous terrain, and international power plays for the world's last great repository of natural resources—turns up the burner on this action thriller.

Jo Bailey's **Erased** (Thomas Dunne/St. Martin's, \$21.95) is the third entry in the General Jack Hospital series featuring Jan Gallagher, single mom and security guard. The hospitalization of a wounded gang member leads a rival gang to kidnap a doctor in reprisal. Jan is forced to play a lone hand, using her friendship with a black woman on the hospital staff as an entree to the gang leaders—and into the heart of danger. As she learns, the price of peace can be very high. Bailey's characters are immediate and compelling, and her insider's depiction of the workings of a big-city hospital will appeal to fans of the two popular medical shows now on television.

Robert Crais fans need no introduction to L.A. private eye Elvis Cole and his sidekick Joe Pike. Those who haven't had the pleasure, however, should rush out to pick up his latest, **Sunset Express** (Hyperion, \$21.95). Elvis is hired by a famous defense attorney to assist in a case that could have been ripped from today's headlines: a wealthy local restaurateur is accused of murdering his wife, dumping her body, and then alleging that she's been kidnapped. As one of a number of investigators on the "Mean Green Defense Team" (as the tabloids are dubbing it), Elvis is routinely assigned to follow up complaints against a woman police officer, the same woman who discovered the bloody murder weapon near the restaurateur's front door. Meanwhile, Lucy Chenier and her son are visiting and staying with Elvis, so things are heating up in his personal life, too. Crais' characters are contemporary and credible, Elvis is fun to be around, and the "backstage" look at an expensive, media-driven legal defense is fascinating.

THE STORY THAT WON

The April Mysterious was won by Diane L. Pennsylvania. Honoring of Fairfax, Virginia; College Station, Texas; Harrisburg, Illinois; Columbus, Ohio; Carol



Photograph contest Smith of Narvon, able mentions go to Art ginia; Frank Peirce of George G. Wright of Nancy J. Rowe of L. Janezic of Kaneohe, Hawaii; Vicki Sansum of Houston, Texas; Renita Rosser of Lexington, Kentucky; Denise Johnston of Kingman, Arizona; Greg Matejek of Belle Mead, New Jersey; Tom Portis of Batesville, Indiana; and R. J. Stevens of Calgary, Alberta, Canada.

SWAN SONG by Diane L. Smith

The captain and I stood looking down at the body of my partner ~~Harry~~ (sorry: Harold) Sloane. Harry ~~was~~ (sorry: had been) a good ~~cop~~ (sorry: police officer). Not a popular guy at the ~~cop shop~~ (sorry: station house), though. His Harvard education was always a little too apparent. Not that he consciously lorded it over us; he just couldn't help it. He had an annoying little habit of correcting everyone's speech. (He used to say, "Language must be precise in order to be effective.") It got on my nerves, but I never thought it would get him killed.

See, ~~me and Harry~~ (sorry: Harold and I) were ~~tailing a perp~~ (sorry: surreptitiously following a suspect) through the park. ~~He~~ (sorry: The suspect) had taken the path that winds around the lake and was headed for the woods. ~~We figured he was leading us to the goods.~~ (Sorry: We conjectured he might possibly be heading towards the evidence for which we were searching.)

~~Harry~~ (sorry: Harold) was looking across the lake, ~~watching the woods~~ (sorry: scanning the stand of timber) for an ambush. He ~~didn't spot the thug~~ (sorry: failed to observe the assailant) behind the tree on our left, but I did. I ~~yelled at Harry~~ (sorry: shouted to Harold), "Duck!" and dived for cover as the gun found its mark.

I believe his last words were, "Swan, actually. . . ."

No, Harry, I did mean "duck."

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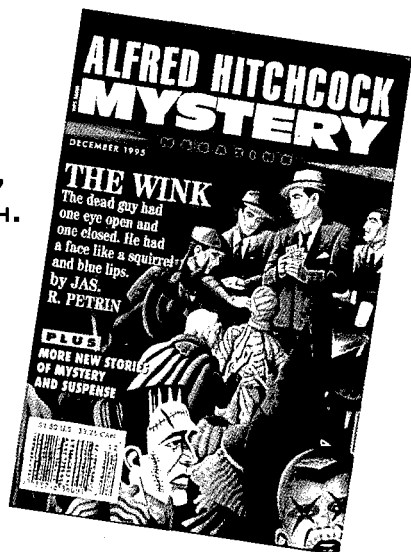
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